



# Presentation by Chris Varney

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@I\_CAN\_Network

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# Acknowledgment of Country



- I am joining you from Wadawurring Country
- I acknowledge the traditional owners of the land and pay respects to elders past, present and emerging
- Attribution: Artwork by Narmi Collins-Widders, 2020.



# Four practical frames

1

Validate & leverage  
their different  
reasoning/ unique  
interests

2

Give the Autistic  
student something  
they can control

3

Break events down  
into 'checkpoints' to  
level  
'catastrophisation'

4

Wrap a positive profile  
around the student's  
unique interests/  
passions (these are  
the source of their  
natural strengths)



# Dedication to Christine Horvath







# What is Autism and the story of I CAN Network?

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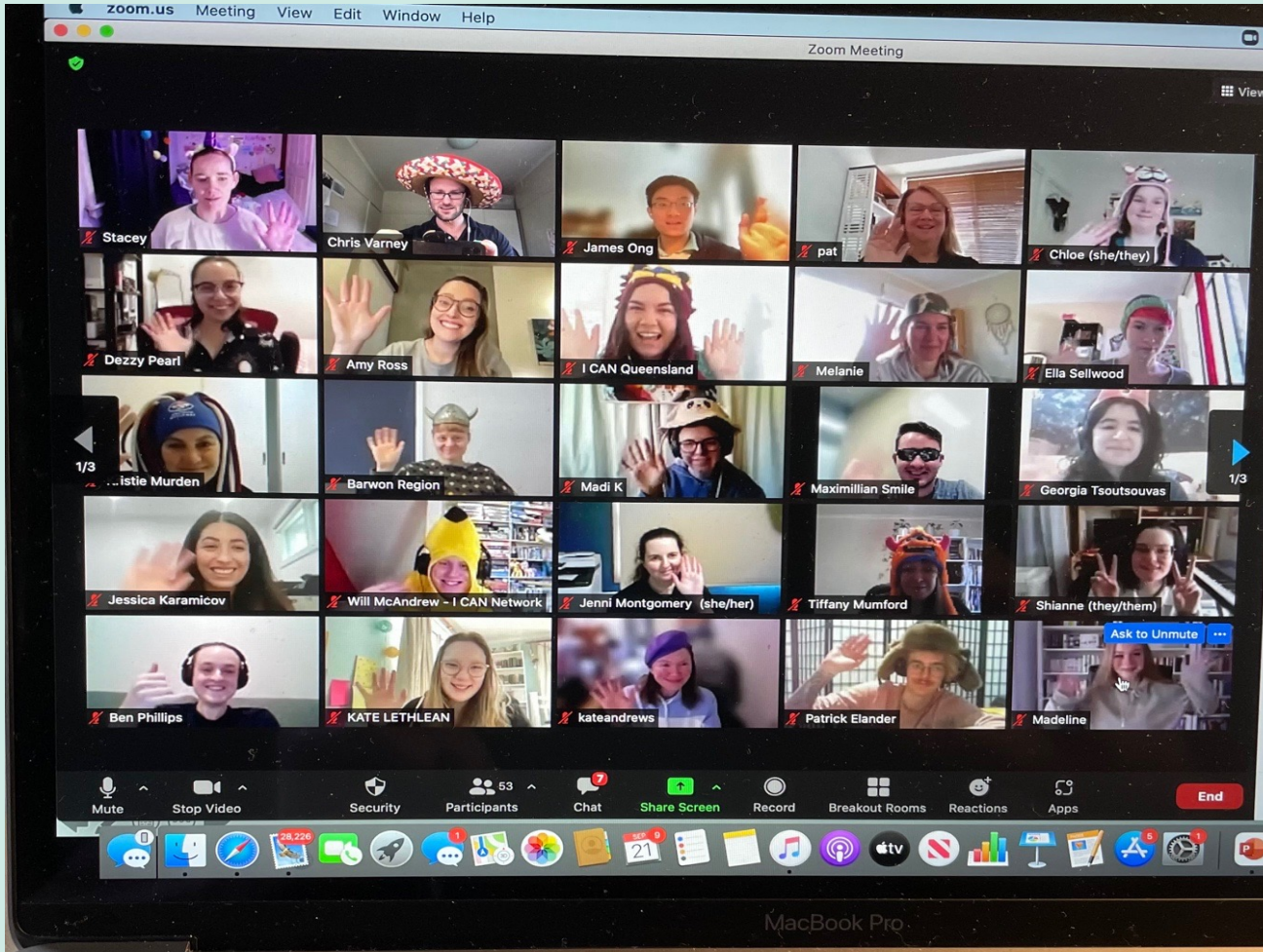
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# Acknowledgement of my team



- Created in September 2013
- 80 staff across Australia
- 64 Autistic and neurodivergent staff
- Australia's largest Autistic-led service provider
- Services: mentoring, consultancy, training
- 2,000 clients which includes 102 government and Catholic schools (primary and secondary) in Victoria and Queensland



# **I CAN Network is a pioneering Autistic-led service provider**

**Contact: [hello@icannetwork.com.au](mailto:hello@icannetwork.com.au)**

**SCHOOL-BASED  
MENTORING & EXPOS**

**NATIONAL ONLINE  
MENTORING  
PROGRAM**

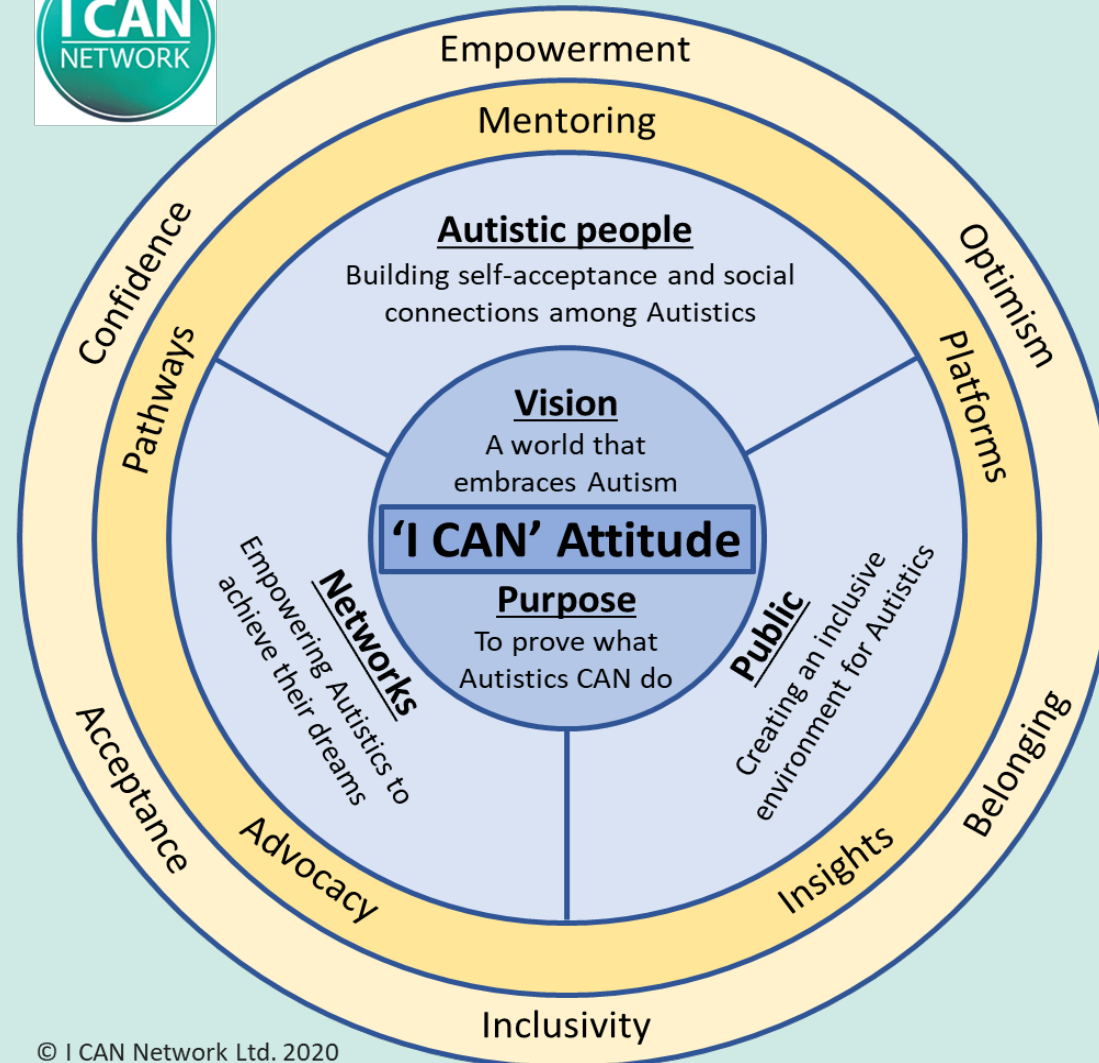


**LEADERSHIP CAMP**

**COMMUNITY-BASED  
PROGRAMS  
IN-SCHOOL INDIVIDUAL  
MENTORING  
PROFESSIONAL  
DEVELOPMENT  
CONSULTANCY**



# I CAN Outcomes Framework



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# We talk about Autism differently

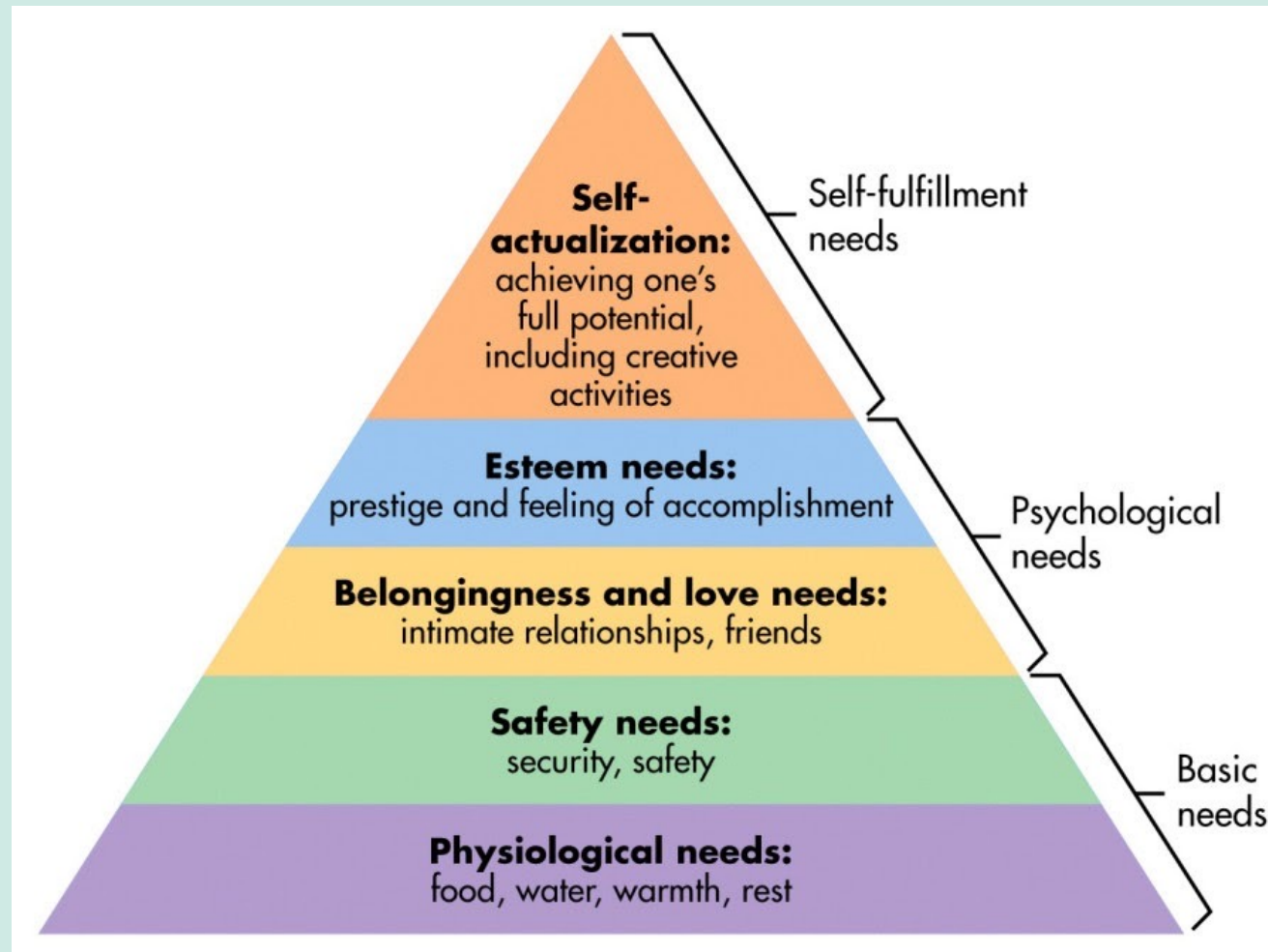


## Attributions:

1. Tim Chan TEDx, 'Turning Impediments Into Opportunities'
2. I CAN Network Communications Guide, 2016, informed by 60 Autistic people

Language type	Meaning
Reflective language	Dear parent/ student, what's your preferred words? Autistic, Autism Spectrum, ASD
Person-first approach	Person with Autism
Identity-first approach	Autistic person
Low functioning, severe Autism	Replace with 'greater support requirements', which has an action-oriented approach
High functioning	Replace with 'lesser support requirements'

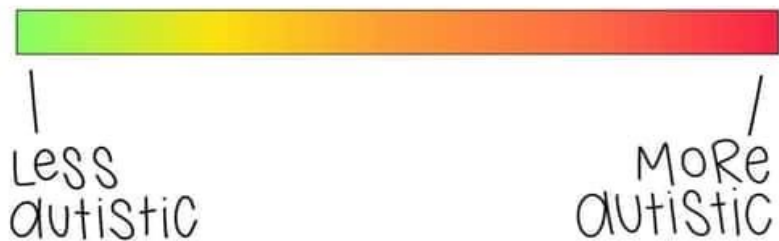
# Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs



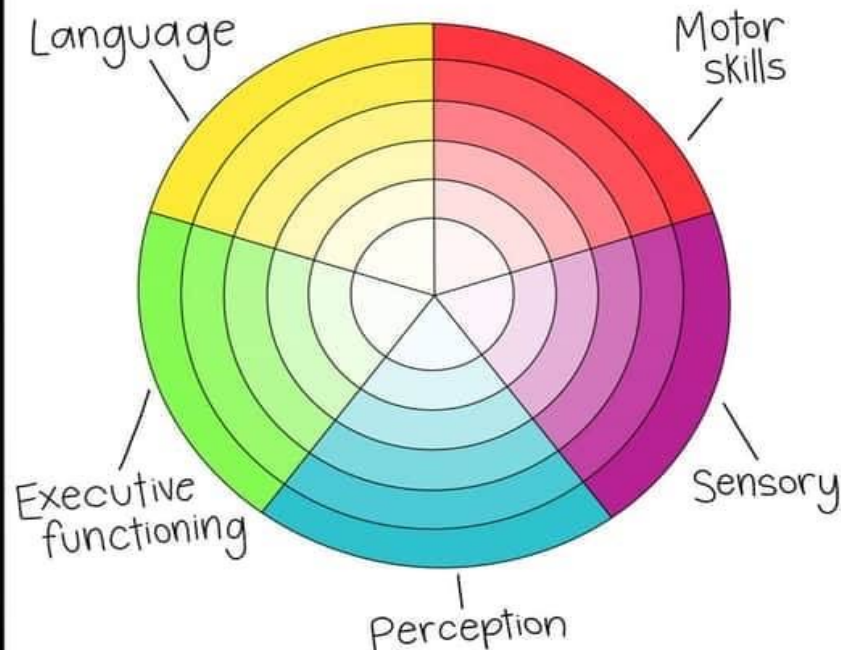


# Understanding Autism as a circular spectrum.

What People THINK  
the autism SPECTRUM  
LOOKS Like:



What it CAN  
actually  
LOOK Like:

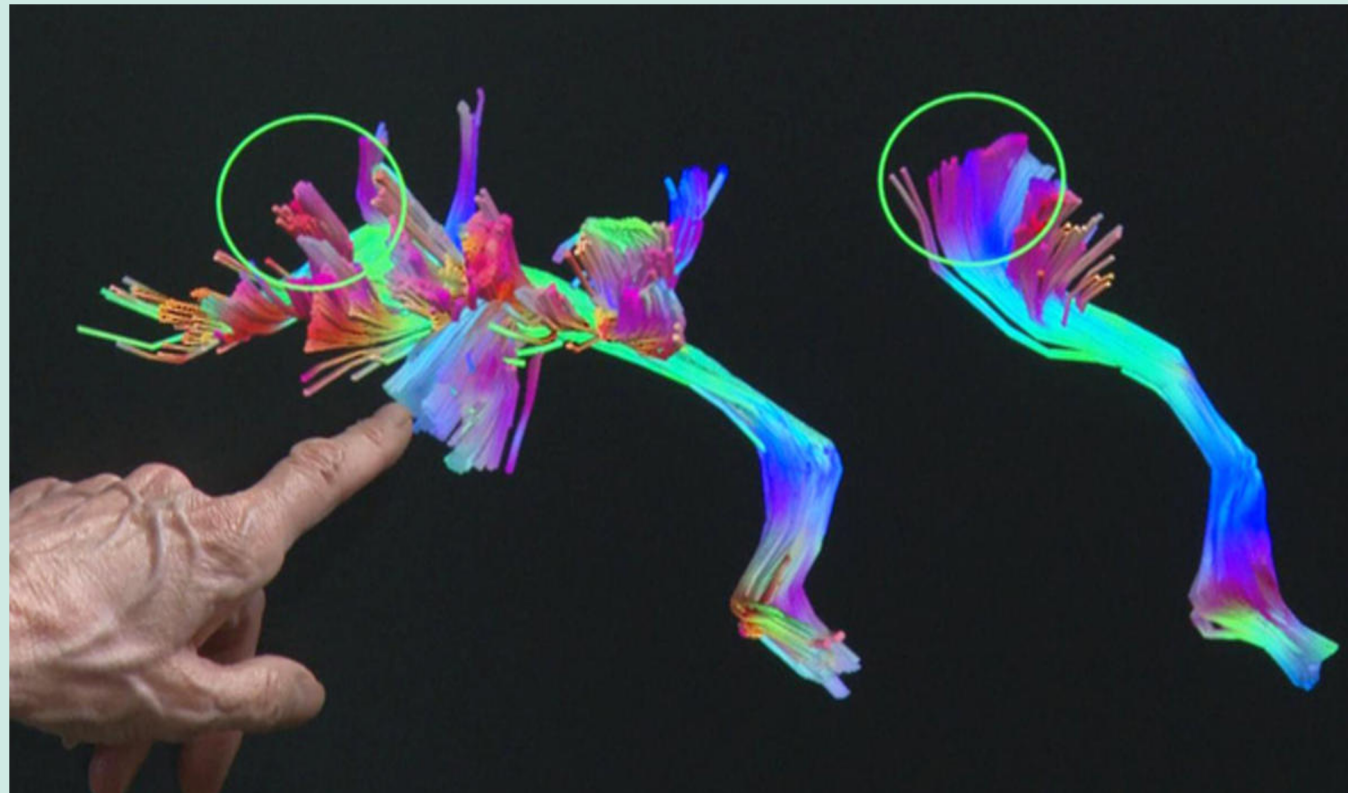


## Understanding Autism:

A circular spectrum with different areas, rather than different 'ends'

# Understanding Autism as a circular spectrum.

Which one is a neuro image of Temple Grandin's brain?



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# Context is King!

- More than 8 in 10 Autistic students experience difficulty in school
- We're empowering primary school parents to trust themselves, keep their head and explain Autism positively to their kids

## Policy & Practice advances

- Queensland Government's *Every Child with a Disability Succeeding Strategy*
- Victorian Government's Disability Inclusion Reform and *Autism Education Strategy*
- Autism Cooperative Research Centre: <https://www.inclusioned.edu.au>



# Primary Schools have a lot to show us





# Primary schools offer a unique relationship with parents



Mum deliberately set out to build a network around me. You were in the network if you made it safe for me to take risks.

# 'Safe' Champions Enable Risk Taking



FAMILIES



SCHOOLS/ EDUCATION



FRIENDS/ SOCIAL

Acceptance



# Key Take Away



- Parents are one of your greatest resources – in in both kid's programs and teenage programs
- Involve them in the development of strategies
- They hold the key to understanding what the school day looks like at home

# Key Take Away



- Embrace the hypersensitivities and high emotions which come from supporting and partnering with Autistic families



# Validating a different reasoning

1

Validate & leverage their different reasoning/ unique interests

# Scripts up your sleeve

- *‘Wow, that’s a very creative way of thinking about it’*
- *‘I had never thought about it that way’*
- *‘You know what?...I’ve learnt something’*



# Validating a different processing style

## AUTISM & EYE CONTACT



"EYE CONTACT IS NOT NECESSARY FOR LISTENING OR PAYING ATTENTION.



MANY AUTISTIC PEOPLE FIND IT EASIER TO LISTEN AND PROCESS AUDITORY INFORMATION WHEN WE DON'T HAVE TO ALSO PROCESS VISUAL INFORMATION.



FORCED EYE CONTACT FOR THE SAKE OF 'APPEARING NORMAL' CAN BE CHALLENGING, TIRING, EVEN PAINFUL. WE AVOID IT FOR A REASON. RESPECT THAT."

ART BY ISABELLA (AT AGE 7)

~ ANONYMOUS



Validate a different processing style and leverage those interests



Henry  
VIII





# Key Take Away



- A young person's interest provides the lever you need to engage them in school
- That interest will develop natural strengths
- Natural strengths can become soft skills for future educational attainment and career development pathways



# Pre-COVID insights from programs

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# Context in high schools

Our context is myth-busting and empowering positive Autistic identity!



## Awareness

98% of Australians report that they have heard of Autism

1 in 4 Australians have an Autistic relative

86% of Australians report having 'contact' with an Autistic person

## Gaps in understanding

88% of Australians are aware that Autism affects everyone differently

Of concern, around 19% believe that Autistic people are violent

## Gaps in understanding

46% of Australians report not having a good understanding of how to support someone with Autism

51.6% of Autistic Australians feel socially isolated

1 in 88 Australians are on the Autism Spectrum (OTARC)

Attribution: Amaze, 2018 [www.onethingforautism.com.au](http://www.onethingforautism.com.au)

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# Context in high schools



## Kids and teens

More than 8 in 10 experience difficulty in school

4 times more likely to be bullied



## Youth

35% do not complete Year 10 or above

44% need to change secondary schools b/c the schools aren't supportive

## Adults

60% Autistic adults are unemployed;

OTARC reports that high functioning Autistic young people are nine times more likely to attempt self-injury than their non-Autistic peers

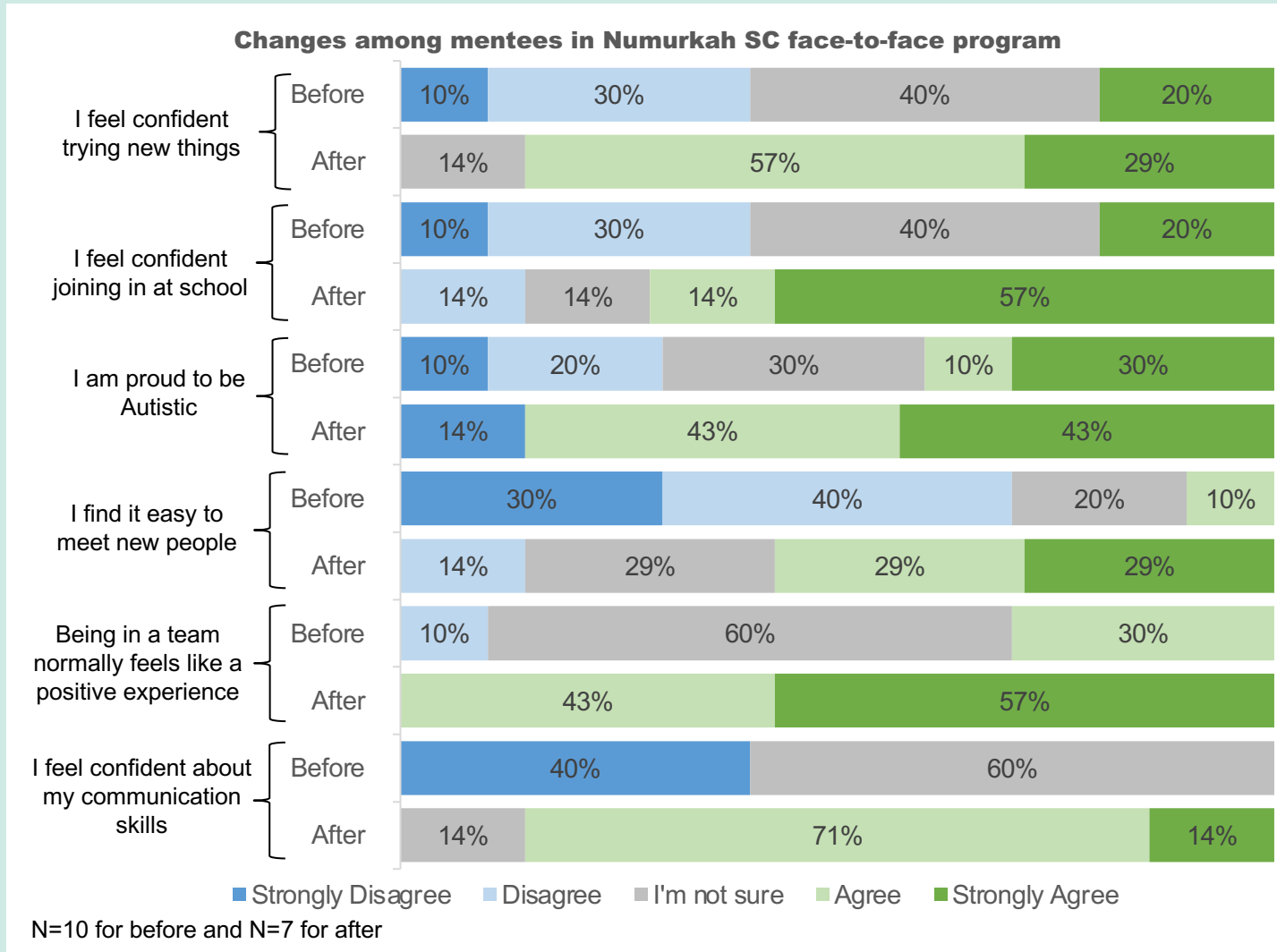
**Attribution: Amaze, 2018; Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2018.**

# Key Take Away



- The insight is Autistic teenagers need to be the highest priority on the inclusion agenda – the data tells us the inclusive strategies of primary schools are not travelling upwards to the secondary system

# Case Study: Numurkah Secondary College

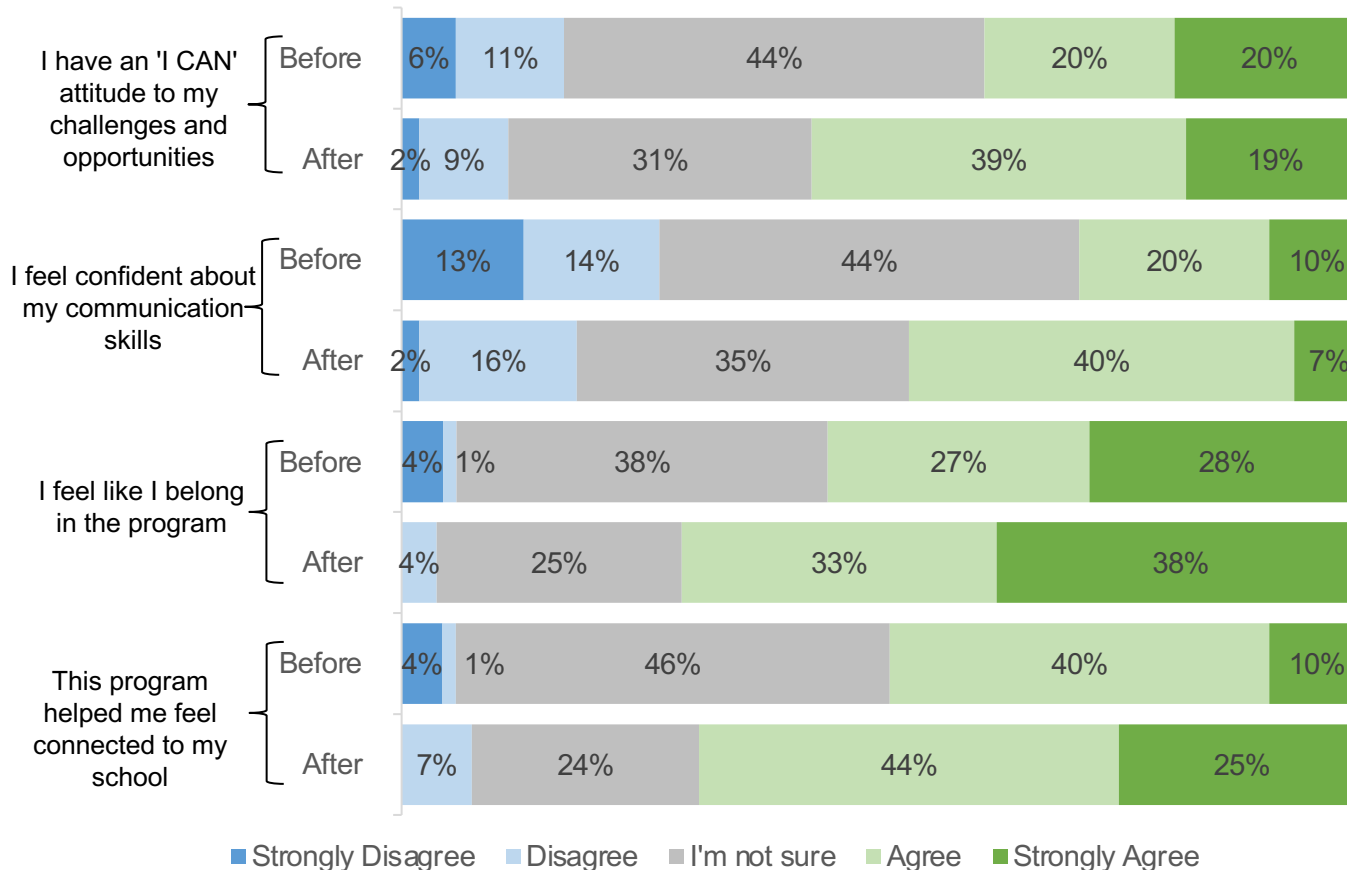


- 66% increase in mentees' self-confidence
- 48% increase in mentees finding it easy to meet new people
- 70% increase in mentees' teamwork
- 86% increase in mentees' communication skills
- Across Northern Victoria we saw a 30% increase in mentees feeling confident to join in at school



# Case Study: Queensland Schools

Snapshot of I CAN Network's school-based programs in Queensland'



N=70-71 for before and N=54-55 for after, pooled from 7 programs

- Are more likely to adopt an 'I CAN' attitude to their challenges and opportunities (18% increase in positive responses);
- Feel more confident about their communication skills (17% increase in positive responses);
- Feel more like they belong in the program (16% increase in positive responses); and
- Feel more connected to their school (19% increase in positive responses).



Give the Autistic student responsibilities, something to control

# Key Take Away



- The insight from the I CAN program is an inclusive teenage programs create situations which an Autistic/ neurodivergent young person can control
- We need to see a young person's control in a positive way



A silhouette of a person rappelling down a tall, jagged rock formation at night. The sky is dark blue with many stars. A bright light source, possibly the moon or a low sun, is visible behind one of the rock peaks, creating a lens flare effect. The person is positioned on the right side of the frame, descending a rope.

Assure Autistic  
people before they  
take risks

# Scripts for emotional reassurance

- *‘You’ve got this’*
- *‘Hey, you’ll be fine’*
- *‘I’ve watched you do harder things’*
- *‘But won’t it be great when you’ve done it?!’*
- *‘What will make this easier?’*

# Creating a ‘positive whisper’ behind the young person

1

(4) Wrap a positive profile around the student’s unique interests/passions (these are the source of their natural strengths)



**Doing things that scare you or make you feel nervous takes  
an I CAN attitude**



# Key Take Away



- The insight from the I CAN program is an inclusive environment is one which deliberately creates a space for young people to feel safe and be themselves
- An environment of non-judgment can help young people transcend all sorts of anxieties





# Responding to COVID-19

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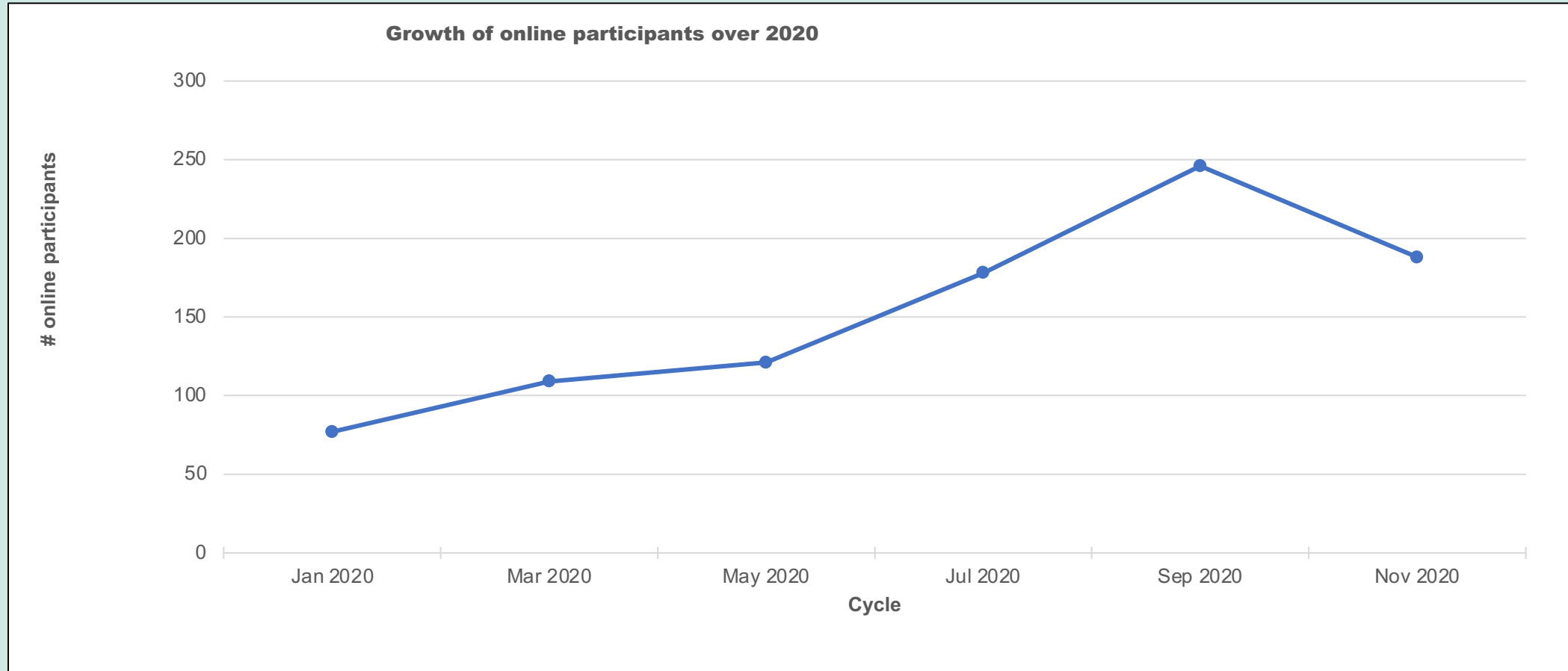
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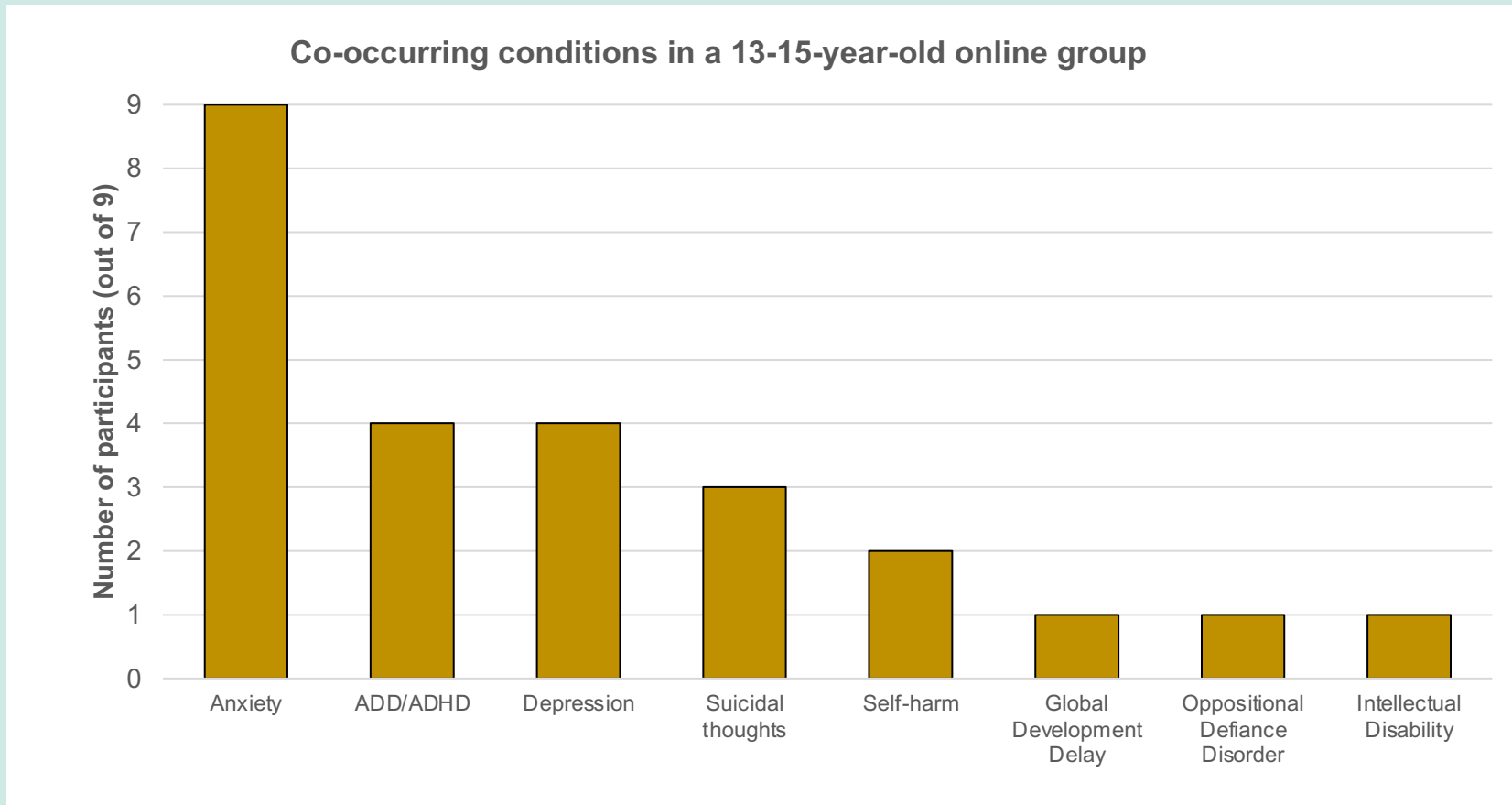
# Growth of I CAN Online



# Co-occurring conditions

- December 2020 Report to Victorian Department of Education
  - 84% of students had anxiety
  - 41% had ADD/ ADHD
  - 28% had Depression
  - 10% of government students who registered for I CAN Online report having had suicidal thoughts

# Autism & Co-Occurring Conditions

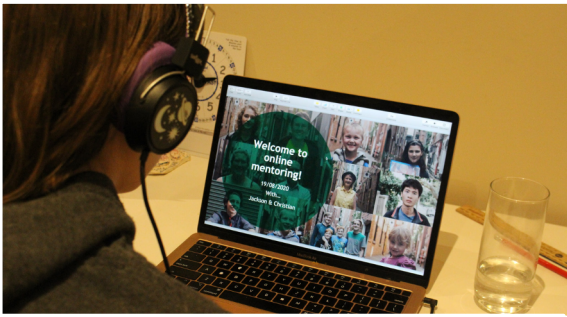




# Key Take Away



- The insight is it's critical to embrace diversity – in all its forms – when working with Autistic teenagers
- Positive Autistic identity and nurturing self-determination are key



**TUESDAY &  
WEDNESDAY 6.40PM  
(13-15/16-20 YRS)**



**THURSDAY 6.40PM-  
LGBTQIA+  
(13-17 YRS)**

**\$270**

**NDIS- Self & Plan  
Managed  
NDIS Reports can  
be requested**

# *I CAN Network Autistic-Led National Online Mentoring Program*

**icannetwork.online**

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**TUESDAY 6.40PM-  
Anime  
(13-16 YRS)**



**THURSDAY 6.40PM-  
Screens, Tunes &  
Characters  
(13-15/16-20 YRS)**

**6 x 1 hour  
weekly session**



# Trauma from COVID-19 school closures

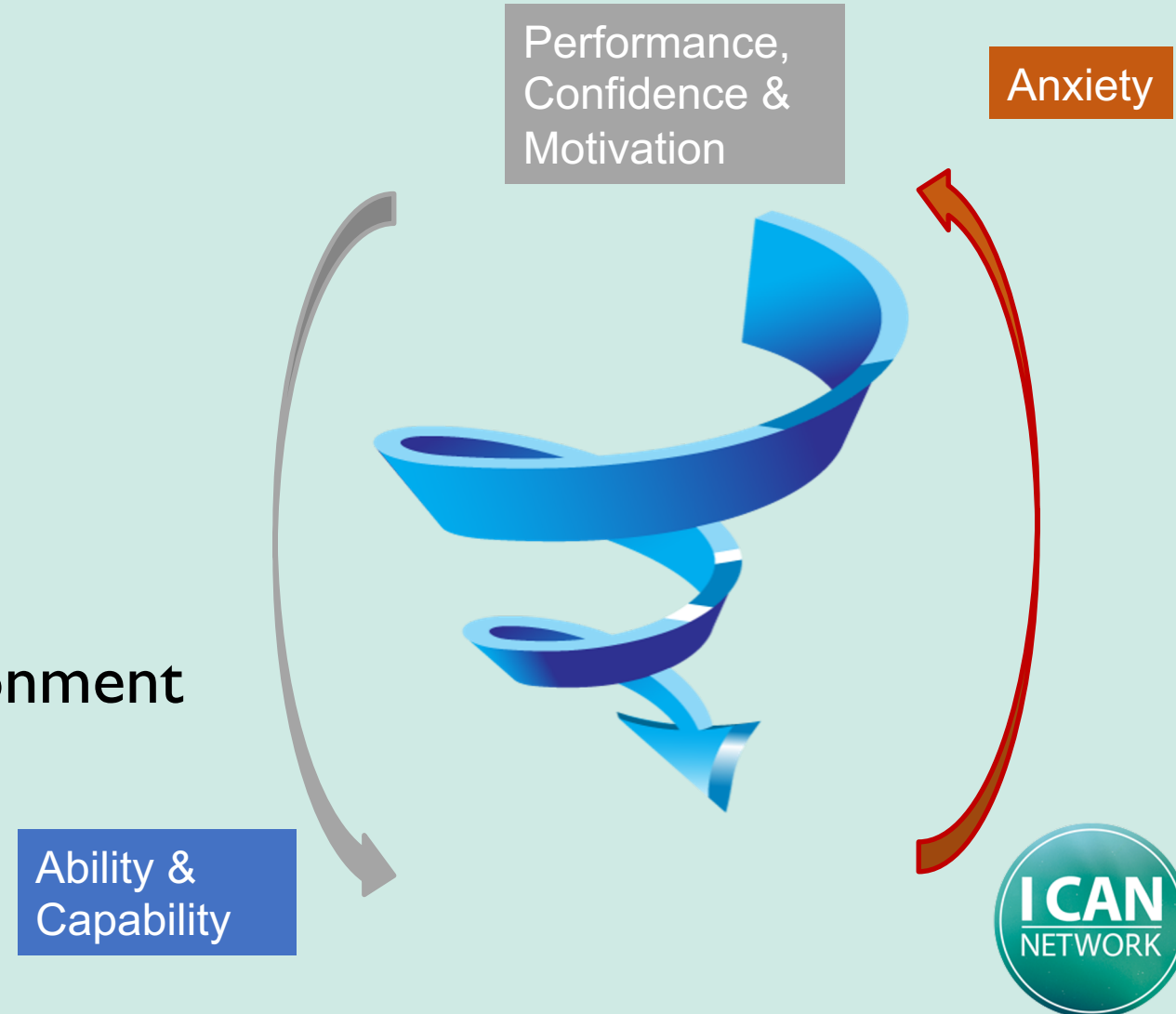
Upcoming report from I CAN Ltd on COVID-19 school closures - trauma

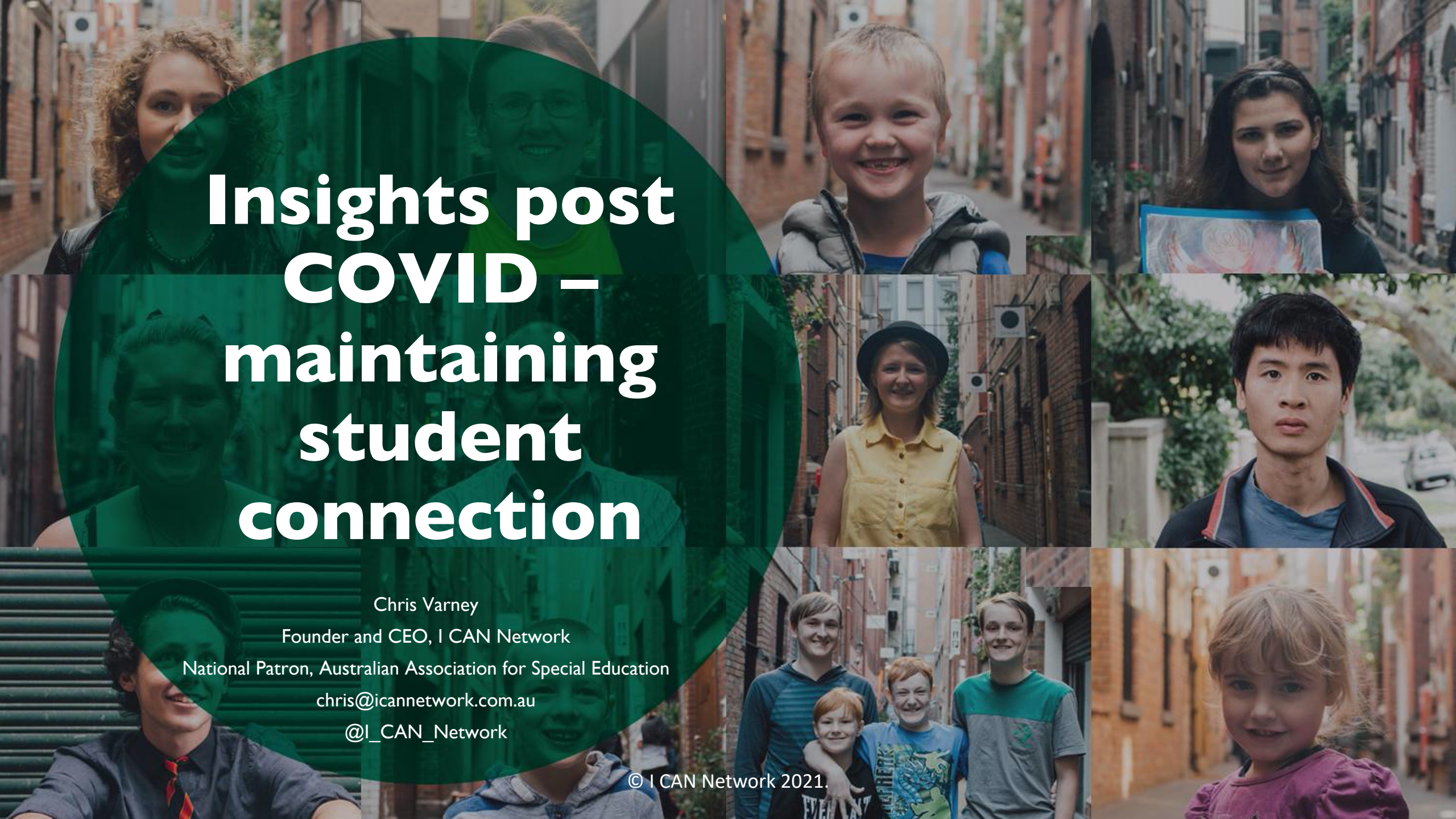
1. The foundation for success with Autistic learners is safety and trust
2. The COVID-19 lockdowns exposed and/or exacerbated many of the vulnerabilities of Autistic learners and their families.
3. Many Autistic learners continue to be impacted by COVID-19 in profound and lasting ways.
4. The approach to IEPs, goal setting and making accommodations varies greatly from school to school and often misses the mark in setting a foundation of trust and safety for that individual Autistic learner
5. There is still an overall lack of understanding of and support for students experiencing 'School Can't' (school attendance difficulties)
6. During Stage 4 lockdown, students in special schools faced enormous barriers in accessing on-site supervision despite the children/their families being 'at risk'
7. Well-intentioned programs and approaches to support disengaged students lose their impact if the execution is not solid and well communicated to all stakeholders.



# Autism, Anxiety & 'Performance' Spiral

- 'Hidden' social norms
- Changes in supports & routines
- Uncertainty (catastrophising)
- Changes in learning styles and environment
- Everyone else can do it!





# Insights post COVID – maintaining student connection

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# Resources for parents

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# Accessing I CAN Network

- Resources webpage: <https://icannetwork.online/online-resources/>
- Accessing I CAN Tip Sheet: <https://icannetwork.online/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/How-to-Access-I-CAN-Programs.pdf>
- Accessing I CAN Webinar:  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m3IKtl5nbGc&t=46s>
- Parent Welcome Video by Chris:  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=feDmUlpTFaw&t=124s>

# Script for disclosure

- You can only gently nudge a parent with disclosure
- The most successful disclosures follow the maturity of the student
- *‘I just want to say that you have the most guts of anyone I know,*
- *‘You know your insane memory, your skills with spelling and what happens when you put your mind to something,*
- *‘You know how at times you can be really difficult to live with,*
- *‘And you can really pull some ridiculous carry on,*
- *‘Well this all means you just have Asperger’s and it’s nothing to be ashamed of, it’s something to be proud of’*

# Resource for parents' disclosing

- See our website: <https://www.icannetwork.com.au/humans-2019/>
- 'Humans on the Autism Spectrum'
  - Mirrors the New York platform with an Autistic lens
  - Stories of all ages and stages and diversities of the Spectrum
  - Very helpful for disclosing Autism, giving adolescents and teenagers a positive perspective on Autism



# Dedication to Christine Horvath





Evaluation Form

<https://forms.gle/CeVSXVpdktYUkufZ6>