



# COOL CONNECTIONS

## IN SCHOOL

*A resilience and strength-based program  
for children 9 - 12 years of age*

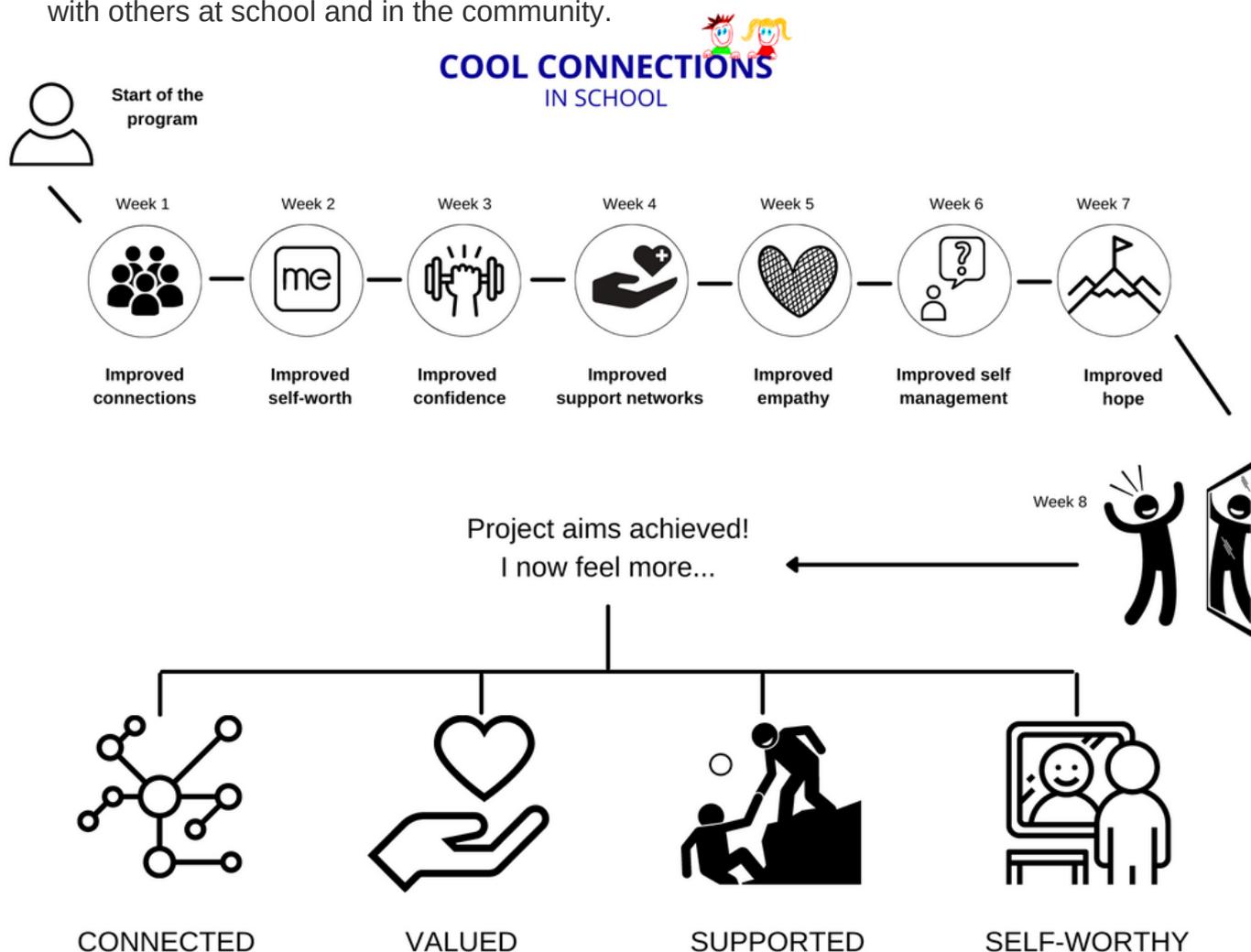
Connected \* Valued \* Supported

# COOL CONNECTIONS IN SCHOOL

Cool Connections in School is a mental health and well-being program for children aged 9-12 years. The program is delivered face to face in school for students in Years 5 and 6 who are experiencing social exclusion, low self-esteem and/or signs and symptoms of anxiety.

Schools are offered a program and collaborate with families/carers and teachers to identify children who will benefit from participating, based on the program outcomes.

Focusing on the child's strengths, the program aims to increase resilience, working with children to build their confidence, better manage their mental and emotional wellbeing, while developing their social skills and to create a sense of connectedness with others at school and in the community.



**50%**

of all mental health problems are apparent by age 14

**22%**

of primary school students have been bullied

**1 in 4**

primary school students feels highly anxious

**In Yr 6**

emotional and behavioural problems are predictors of loss of learning in Year 7

## Preadolescence (9-14 years of age)

### AN OPPORTUNE TIME FOR INTERVENTION

It is estimated that 1 in 7 Australian children experience mental illness and approximately 50 per cent of all serious mental distress begins around the age of 14, with symptoms beginning in primary school.

Preadolescent children, aged 9 to 12 years, are developing physically, emotionally and socially, whilst also taking on greater responsibility at school and at home. It is a time of rapid growth and a significant stage of development.

The groundbreaking Australian Childhood to Adolescence Transition Study shows the importance of these years for shaping emotional well-being, and that a child's physical, emotional and mental well-being during this period can have lifelong implications.

Preadolescence is a vital stage for children in the formation of identity, values, ideas on how to view the world around them and attitudes towards other people and themselves. Mental health support provided at this time can prevent children and young people falling into crisis or developing more complex issues later in life.

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## COOL CONNECTIONS IN SCHOOL

- 8 weeks
- 10 students
- 2 facilitators
- Engaged, connected and creative

Cool Connections is an 8-week program comprised of weekly, 90-minute sessions delivered by two trained facilitators.

Small group sizes allow for more one-on-one support as needed.

Group discussions and learning opportunities are reinforced with related creative projects as students are introduced to the foundations of resilience such as individual strengths and identity, safe places and safe people, the value of gratitude, problem solving strategies and tools to help with anxious feelings and behaviours.

The program creates a sense of connectedness and trust within the group that continues into the playground and beyond.

### Program Objectives

- **Connecting isolated children:**  
Participants meet in a relaxed environment, supported by facilitators who are trained to manage strong emotions and personality conflicts.
- **Supporting marginalised children**, *such as those experiencing social disadvantage, family breakdown, violence or belong to a cultural minority or are a young carer:*  
The atmosphere of trust and safety created in each session promotes self-expression and allows participants to feel accepted without judgement.
- **Strengthening support networks:**  
Participants learn to identify supportive adults both within the school and in their home life. This allows school staff to provide appropriate follow-up care, such as counselling referrals, discussions with parents and caregivers, additional classroom resources.
- **Boosting self-esteem and confidence:**  
Participants engage in creative projects that encourage them to explore their own identity, values, unique gifts and positive personal qualities.

## What underpins the success of the Program

- Evidenced-informed program that is strength-based
- Engaging mix of creative self-expression, open discussions and group learning
- Early intervention, responsive to changing needs
- The small group size promotes self-disclosure and connection
- School support and engagement is encouraged
- Utilizes local community knowledge and current research to ensure relevance and best practice
- Experienced and highly adaptable facilitators
- Feedback and other data gathered each term drives continuous improvement

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# EXPECTED OUTCOMES

## Short Term Outcomes

### 1-6 months

Children will:

- Have an increased sense of self-worth
  - Engage in more positive ways with peers and teachers and at home
  - Have a better understanding of their own unique strengths, abilities and skills
  - Have goals and ideas for the future
  - Identify appropriate resources and strategies for self- management
  - Understand problem solving benefits over reactive behaviour
  - Make appropriate decisions about their safety
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## Medium Term Outcomes

### 6-12 months

Children will:

- Be able to better manage social or learning challenges
  - Have improved confidence and self-belief
  - Engage more frequently with peers and school community
  - Be able to acknowledge individual strengths and positive qualities of others
  - Be more self-aware and demonstrate empathy (identify their own and others emotions)
  - Have improved problem solving skills
  - Have gained an increased sense of belonging in the school community
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## Long Term Outcomes

### Beyond 12 months

Children and young people will be more likely to continue to develop:

- Improved relationship skills
- Improved resilience to anxiety and stress producing situations
- Improved ability to connect with peers and other support networks
- Respect for the strengths and positive differences of themselves and others
- Improved educational and social outcomes
- Smoother transition into secondary school

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## Program Rationale

The National Mental Health and Wellbeing Survey 2017-2018 reports one in seven Australian children experience mental distress and half of all serious mental illness in adulthood begin before the age of 14. The earlier in a person's life that these problems are identified and addressed, the greater the opportunity to improve social, emotional and behavioural outcomes over the long term.

Cool Connections in School has been researched, designed and developed in consultation with educators, art therapists and mental wellbeing professionals.

The program's emphasis on creative expression reflects current research on the best ways to allow children to express themselves, foster hope and build self-worth. Studies suggest that engaging in art-based activities can help children develop a sense of belonging and to cope with difficult feelings [Macpherson et al (2015), Lee et al (2012)].

The expected outcome of the program is to improve mental and emotional wellbeing indicators in seven key areas - confidence, connection, character, competence, contribution, coping and control. These are drawn from child and adolescent specialist, child paediatrician and human development expert, Ken Ginsburg's 7Cs of Resilience' [<http://www.fosteringresilience.com/7cs.php>].

Helping young children to connect with their strengths and manage challenges also offers long-term social and economic benefits. This is because children who feel competent, safe and supported at school tend to become self-supporting and contributing community members who are less likely to fall into chronic social disadvantage.

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### Indirect beneficiaries include:

- Family members - increased self-esteem and problem-solving abilities may improve relationships with caregivers and siblings.
- Support teachers - their presence helps to build trust and promote disclosure from vulnerable students, so they can be assisted more effectively.
- Classroom teachers - improved confidence and ability to regulate emotions may improve classroom behaviour.
- Community – greater participation and positive contribution in society