The Love of Learning Program:
Children's Voices.

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Executive Summary

Overview

The Pyjama Foundation established the Love of Learning program to support children living in out-of-home care (OOHC) by providing them with a volunteer mentor. This process evaluation reviewed the program's design, systems, and processes, with a focus on how it supports children in OOHC through a child-centred and trauma-informed approach.

Children in OOHC often experience trauma, including abuse and neglect, which can lead to negative emotional, behavioural, neurobiological, and social outcomes, as well as educational disadvantage. These experiences can place children in a chronic stress state, limiting their ability to engage safely in learning and relationships (Blaustein & Kinniburgh, 2019). The Love of Learning program addresses these challenges by fostering safe, consistent, and supportive mentoring relationships, using play-based and relational strategies to engage children in academic, recreational, and life-skill activities.

The evaluation was conducted in two phases, and this report focuses on the second phase; hearing children's voices in the Love of Learning program. The findings of this phase of the evaluation highlighted three interrelated themes; relationships, recognition, and relevance, that were central to children's experiences of the program.

Methods

This process evaluation used a child-led, reflective approach. Seven children participating in the Love of Learning program were invited to create a guidebook for new Pyjama Angels using journey mapping and empathy mapping techniques as well as develop persona images to represent their relationship with an imagined mentor. These creative exercises, supported by the research team, allowed children to reflect on and express their experiences of the program, including relationships, learning activities, and personal growth. Data were collected through written reflections, verbal discussions, and the visual persona exercises.

Key findings

Children's reflections highlighted three interconnected themes: relationships, recognition, and relevance. They consistently emphasised the importance of safe, trusting, and enjoyable relationships with their Pyjama Angels, which allowed them to engage more fully in learning and other activities. Children also valued Angels noticing and affirming their strengths, interests, and efforts, which contributed to confidence, motivation, and a sense of capability. Finally, children reported that activities were most engaging when child-led and connected to their interests and everyday experiences, including both academic and recreational tasks. These findings suggest that relational, supportive, and relevant approaches are central to children's positive experiences of the program.

Implications

The Love of Learning program's approach, combining relationship-building, recognition, and relevance, appears to support engagement, wellbeing, and learning for children in OOHC. While the findings are tentative due to the small sample, they provide practical insights for mentor training, program design, and future evaluation. Ongoing assessment and a formal outcomes evaluation will be important for establishing stronger evidence of the program's impact on academic achievement, social-emotional skills, and long-term life outcomes.

For funders and policy-makers, this evaluation highlights the potential of the Love of Learning program to reduce educational disadvantage, foster resilience, and promote wellbeing among children in OOHC. By investing in volunteer-led, trauma-aware, child-centred, and relationally focused mentoring programs, stakeholders can help support positive life trajectories for some of Australia's most vulnerable children.

The Project

Purpose

The Pyjama Foundation has engaged QUT to undertake a full evaluation of their Love of Learning program to identify the impact the program is making, identify ways to improve and increase impact and determine how to build organisational capacity to continue collecting impact data. The Love of Learning program is a mentoring program, partnering volunteers (Pyjama Angels) with a child or children living in out-of-home care (OOHC). The program is The Pyjama Foundation's principal program which operates across Australia in Queensland, New South Wales, Victoria. The evaluation was conducted in two phases.

Phase one of this evaluation was conducted in 2022-2023 (Knight et al., 2024) with QUT researchers using an appreciative enquiry approach to review the theory of change, design and approach of the Program. The report for phase one can be accessed here.

Phase one of the evaluation found that The Pyjama Foundation's Love of Learning program is evidence-based and operates within the child protection system to promote children's wellbeing and a love of learning. Its distinctive approach involves matching committed volunteer mentors with OOHC children for long-term relationships, focusing on building safety, trust, and engagement in educational and social activities. Key effective features include the rigorous processes for recruiting, training, supporting, and retaining mentors, as well as the thoughtful matching process.

Phase two of this evaluation investigated the perspectives of children in OOHC on the Love of Learning program. As the beneficiaries of the program, it is vital to include the voices of children in the evaluation (Knight, & Kingston, 2021). The QUT research team used a co-designed approach with children in OOHC to answer the following questions:

How does the program create caring connections between Pyjama Angels and children?

How does the program improve children's identity, self-efficacy and academic resilience?

How does the program develop and improve children's attitude towards literacy (reading motivation)?

This project was conducted in 2025 with ethics approval from QUT's ethics committee (approval number 6365).

Children's reflections highlighted three interconnected themes: relationships, recognition, and relevance. They consistently emphasised the importance of safe, trusting, and enjoyable relationships with their Pyjama Angels, which allowed them to engage more fully in learning and other activities.

Scope, method, and limitations

This second phase of the evaluation focused on capturing the experiences of children in out-of-home-care (OOHC) who participated in the Love of Learning program. The aim was to centre the voices of children and young people, rather than relying on adults to speak on their behalf.

A qualitative inquiry was undertaken, using a human-centred and co-designed methodology. A single workshop was held with a small group of children, designed to actively engage them in reflecting on their mentoring experiences with their Pyjama Angel. The workshop provided opportunities for participants to share how their Pyjama Angels had supported their sense of identity, self-efficacy, academic resilience, and motivation for reading.

Capturing the direct perspectives of other stakeholders in the Love of Learning program, such as the volunteer mentors and foster carers, was outside the scope of this phase of the evaluation, however the Pyjama Foundation continues to collect and monitor feedback from these stakeholders. Some of this data was included in the report related to phase one of this evaluation.

Terms

The Pyjama Foundation is an Australian nonprofit organisation that founded and manages the Love of Learning program. The Love of Learning program mentors are known as 'Pyjama Angels' and each participating child is known as a 'Pyjama Child'; however, the report uses the generic terms 'child' and 'mentor'. Individuals are referred to as 'child', 'mentor', and 'foster carer' rather than by name to protect anonymity.

Introduction

Context and need for the program

Approximately 46,200 children in Australia live in out-of-home-care (OOHC), often due to complex needs and challenges, with 82% in OOHC for a year or more (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare [AIHW], 2025). Many of these children have experienced trauma, such as abuse or neglect, which can lead to negative emotional, behavioural, neurobiological, and social outcomes, and consequently, negative life trajectories and disadvantage. Children in OOHC consistently face worse educational outcomes than their peers, leading to risks of future psychosocial concerns. The Love of Learning program was established in 2004 by The Pyjama Foundation to protect children in OOHC from these risks by providing a volunteer mentor. The relational aspect of mentoring children in OOHC has been shown to be a significant protective factor against disadvantage (Van Dam et al., 2018; Sulimani-Aidan & Tayri-Schwartz, 2021).

The success of the Love of Learning program is influenced by various factors surrounding the child, including their background, culture, experiences with trauma and OOHC, as well as their carer, school, other organisations, and the local community. While children in OOHC may participate in various programs, a community-based mentoring program like the Love of Learning program can be a crucial influence in a child's life. The mentoring relationship has the potential to act as a protective factor, particularly for children in OOHC who are at risk of disengaging from school due to instability at home and school, poor mental health, and challenges with forming attachments. This program contributes to the wellbeing and educational engagement of these vulnerable children, aiming to reduce their risk of disadvantage (Knight et al., 2013).

Literacy and cognitive skills are important protective factors in mitigating the educational disadvantage often experienced by children in OOHC (Maclean et el., 2024). Research indicates that positive attitudes towards learning often develop at home before school, and children who have a positive view of reading tend to achieve better literacy skills. Having an adult read to or with them, and providing access to a variety of reading materials, fosters a more positive attitude towards learning to read. Furthermore, reading books purely for pleasure can significantly impact reading development, academic skills, and overall outcomes (Galea et al., 2025;

Knight et al., 2013). The Love of Learning program aims to improve literacy and instil a love of learning in children in OOHC, who may miss out on supportive home environments in their formative developmental years. Key to this aim is the relational focus of the program. The positive relationship built between the mentor volunteer and child is central to the program's theory of change, and success.

Program overview

The Love of Learning program pairs children in OOHC with volunteer mentors, known as 'Pyjama Angels,' who are unpaid and aged 18-84 years. Since 2004, over 10,500 mentors have been trained, and 19,035 children matched, with the average match lasting 3.5 years. The program aims to improve literacy and instil a love of learning in children in a safe and inclusive way. Initially, the program's theory of change focused on volunteers reading to children to improve literacy. However, based on learning and systems thinking, the program has evolved to place a greater emphasis on the relationship between the mentor and the child, recognising that a close, enduring connection creates the best environment for learning. The Pyjama Foundation views educational disadvantage as a complex social problem requiring multi-organisational responses and works in partnership with other stakeholders within the child protection, health, education, and community ecosystem.

Through phase one of the process evaluation of the Love of Learning program, four interconnected principles were identified; 1) a committed mentor; 2) thoughtful matching of children and mentors; 3) positive mentoring relationships and 4) individualised child-centred activities. These principles underpin the program's success in creating optimal conditions for children to experience positive change and reduce their risk of disadvantage (Knight et al., 2024). In phase two of this evaluation, the direct experiences of the children involved in the Love of Learning program were evaluated to build upon and verify this data from phase one.

Process and participants

To capture the experiences of children participating in the Love of Learning program, the evaluation was designed to provide choice in how children shared their perspectives. A workshop was held at Queensland University of Technology's (QUT) Gardens Point campus in a teaching room. This location was selected in consultation with the Pyjama Foundation to ensure it was safe, accessible, and familiar, as children and carers regularly attend events at QUT.

During the workshop, foster carers were accommodated in an adjacent room where they could relax and access wellbeing activities such as magazines, puzzles, colouring, newspapers, refreshments, and the campus grounds. Carers were also able to converse with a member of the research team. A $50 gift card was provided to carers to acknowledge their time and cover any associated costs.

The primary data collection tool was a booklet template, designed to guide children in creating a guidebook for new Pyjama Angels (see Appendix A). Children could choose how they contributed, including writing, drawing, speaking, or generating images using a generative AI tool (facilitated by a researcher). The guidebook activity encouraged children to reflect on what they felt was most important for new Angels to know when beginning

the program, how relationships developed over time, and the impact of these relationships on their identity, self-efficacy, academic resilience, and reading motivation. Rather than directly asking children about their personal experiences, the research team worked with each child to create a persona (Kerr et al., 2023), allowing children to comfortably share hypothetical or imagined responses while reflecting on their own experiences.

The workshop was structured using a human-centred participatory design approach (Schepers et al., 2018), incorporating journey mapping and empathy mapping to explore how Pyjama Angels engage with children and support their learning and personal growth. A mosaic approach was used to collect both visual and audio data, capturing the nuances of the connections children made with their Angels. Researchers applied the principles of yarning (Bessarab & Ng'andu, 2010) to build rapport, sustain engagement, and encourage open reflection. Children worked both collaboratively and individually to create the guidebooks, reflecting on their experiences while projecting these onto their imagined persona child.

Each table was assigned at least one researcher to support children with activities, and microphones were placed on tables to record interactions. Tables were equipped with coloured pens, stickers, and craft supplies,

enabling children to actively create and participate in an engaging and supportive environment. As the focus of the project, the guidebook was designed to provide new Pyjama Angels with the information children felt was important before meeting them for the first time. The activities and questions included the following:

1. **Getting to know your child** – When meeting your child, what might they be thinking, feeling, and doing? This involved empathy mapping and reflection on the child's identity, self-efficacy, resilience, and reading motivations at the start of the program.

2. **Starting the program** – How should you introduce yourself as the Angel, and how should you explain the program? What are the dos and don'ts at the start of the program?

3. **A day in the life of…** – What activities would you do with your child, and which activities are most fun?

4. **Journey mapping** – What might your relationship look like over one year or five years?

5. **Tips to help your child** – What practical advice might support your child with reading or other activities?

6. **After you become a regular Angel** – How might the child be thinking, feeling, and behaving once the Angel has become a consistent presence in their life?

Through engagement with these activities, individually, in small groups, and as a larger group, the children reflected on the program and the ways their Pyjama Angels had engaged with them. These iterative cycles of making, telling, and enacting (Brandt et al., 2012) provided insights to address the following research questions:

- How does the program create caring connections between Pyjama Angels and children?

- How does the program support children's identity, self-efficacy, and academic resilience?

- How does the program influence children's attitudes towards literacy and reading motivation?

Appreciative Inquiry, a strengths-based, positive approach to evaluation and organisational development, guided this process (Greenwood & Kelly, 2019). Appreciative Inquiry was used to explore the program's strengths, possibilities, and successes. This method was particularly appropriate for the evaluation as it aligned with the values of the Pyjama Foundation, enabling children to share their perspectives in a positive, empowering way.

Seven children agreed to participate in this evaluation and provided verbal and written consent prior the workshop. Written consent was also obtained from the child's foster carer. Members of the research team worked closely with each child to develop their persona and record their responses to the proposed questions using the booklet template as a guide.

The participants were aged 8-14 years old. Four out of the seven children identified their cultural background as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander, and four out of seven children were female. Most participants had been involved in the Love of Learning program for more than two years.

Adopting a trauma-informed and culturally safe approach in this evaluation was crucial, as OOHC children have typically experienced various types of trauma, and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children make up 33% of the Love of Learning program participants. All members of the research team were familiar with working in trauma-informed and culturally safe ways with young people (Bailey et al., 2019; Stubbs et al., 2024). The Pyjama Foundation promotes cultural safety, including cultural training for staff, culturally appropriate resources for mentors, and a First Nations Advisory Body. This First Nations Advisory Body was consulted in the designing of the children's workshop.

Data collection

Where children had written or illustrated directly in the booklet template this data was transcribed manually. All conversations between the researchers and children were recorded and transcribed. In addition, when creating the persona with each child, Generative Artificial Intelligence (GenAI) was used to create images related to each child and their mentor. The images and the prompts used to create them were recorded and analysed (Jewitt, & Oyama, 2001).

Findings

Children reflected on the program and the ways their Pyjama Angels had engaged with them. These reflections were used to explore three key research questions, aimed at understanding how the Love of Learning program is experienced by participating children and how its objectives and underlying theory of change are realised:

Research Question 1: How does the program create caring connections between Pyjama Angels and children?

Research Question 2: How does the program improve children's identity, self-efficacy and academic resilience?

Research Question 3: How does the program develop and improve children's attitude towards literacy (reading motivation)?

Three key themes emerged from the data collected during the children's workshop:

1. **Relationships first:** Consistent, caring, and trusting relationships between mentors and children form the foundation of all positive outcomes.

2. **Recognition builds confidence and resilience:** Encouragement, acknowledgement of strengths, and supportive role modelling help children build self-efficacy, resilience, and positive identity.

3. **Relevance facilitating engagement and enjoyment:** Literacy and learning outcomes are most feasible when activities are fun, collaborative (side by side), and connected to children's interests and real-life experiences.

Relationships

The relational aspect of the Love of Learning program emerged as a central strength. By placing the relationship at the heart of activities and time spent together, children were able to experience a sense of connection first, which then created the conditions to pursue more targeted academic or life skill goals. This was consistently demonstrated through the children's written and verbal contributions when creating their guidebook for new Angels, as well as in their collaborative creation of the child and Angel personas.

All seven children highlighted positive relational dimensions of the Love of Learning program. They emphasised trust, friendship, connection, closeness, safety, and having fun together as the most important aspects of their mentoring relationships. As one child put it, *"You feel like you've known each other all your life."* Others described the relationship as a space where they could *"be themselves or express themselves"* and that it *"feels really close, safe."*

These reflections are consistent with a large body of evidence showing that a supportive relationship is one of the most powerful protective factors against adverse outcomes associated with trauma and adversity (Hughes et al., 2017; Van Dam et al., 2018). For children in out-of-home care (OOHC), the importance of this relational dimension is amplified, as many have missed out on the early relational experiences in infancy and childhood that are important for secure attachment and healthy social, emotional, and cognitive development (Chesmore et al., 2017; Schore, 2021). The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW, 2025) highlights that the majority of children in OOHC have experienced significant adversity prior to entering care, including abuse, neglect, and disrupted attachments. By providing children in OOHC with a mentor who prioritises relational connection, the Pyjama Foundation is directly addressing a core developmental need and bridging a key gap in their lives.

A further strength of the program is its emphasis on longevity of relationships. The aim of 12-month or longer matches aligns with research showing that sustained, consistent, and attuned relationships provide the stability and reliability required for trust to develop, and for children to feel secure enough to engage in new challenges (Blaustein & Kinniburgh, 2019; Christensen et al., 2020). This also aligns with findings from the CREATE Foundation's Report Card (2023), which emphasises the importance of stability, connection, and trusted relationships in the lives of young people with a care experience. The children's reflections highlighted this; they valued Angels who "show up," who "keep promises," and who make the relationship a safe and dependable space.

From a neuroscience perspective, relationships are foundational for learning. Stress, uncertainty, and relational disconnection activate the brain stem and limbic system, shifting the child into survival responses (fight, flight, or freeze). In this state, the prefrontal cortex, the area responsible for higher-order thinking, problem-solving, and learning, cannot fully engage (Smith, & Pollak, 2020; Yan & Rein, 2021). Secure and attuned relationships help to regulate the stress response, calming the lower brain areas and allowing children to access the cognitive resources needed for activities such as reading, mathematics, homework, and cooking (Gee, & Cohodes, 2023). In this sense, the mentor–child relationship is not peripheral to learning, but a neurobiological prerequisite for it.

Key relational factors identified through the workshop include:

- Consistency and reliability – Mentors who show up regularly and follow through on promises build trust.

- Emotional and relational safety – Children described feeling accepted, listened to, and valued.

- Reading as enjoyable and relational – Reading was perceived as fun when it was embedded in connection and shared enjoyment, rather than framed as a task or obligation.

The relational aspect of the program was also evident in the images the children created using GenAI. Each child worked with the researcher to design a digital image that represented the relationship their "persona" child had with their imagined Angel. These images consistently reflected closeness, highlighted child-led activities, and showed interactions happening side by side in neutral, non-clinical (non-educational) environments, such as outdoors. This visual layer reinforced the children's own descriptions of the program as grounded in authentic, safe, and enjoyable connections (see section "Visual Insights into Relationships, Recognition and Relevance).

Together, these findings reinforce the critical role of relationships in creating the safe, connected, and regulated states that enable children in OOHC to thrive both academically and personally.

Tips for helping with reading

The children involved in creating the guidebook offered very specific and practical tips for Angels.

Tips for reading:

Tailor the experience: Pick stories and books that the child likes. Understand if they dislike reading because it's too hard or because they don't like the genre (e.g., sci-fi).

Be supportive: Help them understand the words, explain things using simple wording, and give them time to think.

Make it enjoyable: Take breaks between reading and, most importantly, do not push them to finish when they are tired.

General tips for helping:

Show, don't just tell: Show the child how to do something rather than making them do it by themselves.

Be patient and encouraging: Don't get mad if they are struggling. Provide motivation.

Respect their space and preferences: Ask them what they want to do and where they want to do their homework.

Listen and answer their questions.

Secure and attuned relationships help to regulate the stress response, calming the lower brain areas and allowing children to access the cognitive resources needed for activities such as reading, mathematics, homework, and cooking. In this sense, the mentor–child relationship is not peripheral to learning, but a neurobiological prerequisite for it.

Recognition

Individual recognition was identified as an important factor in the success of the Love of Learning program. Children reflected that their mentors consistently noticed and affirmed their unique strengths, interests, and efforts. This recognition helped them feel capable and valued, which in turn supported positive identity development and increased their motivation to learn. For children in out-of-home care (OOHC), who may have experienced disrupted attachments and a lack of consistent affirmation in their earlier lives, this recognition from a trusted adult can be transformative.

Children's reflections during the workshop highlighted the power of recognition: they valued Pyjama Angels who listened to them, shared similar interests, provided encouragement, and supported them in areas where they struggled. As children explained, a mentor is *"someone who is on your side"*; who can *"help with what you struggle with"*; and who will *"do things that you like."*

The program explicitly positions the child as a unique individual. At the outset of the relationship, Angels focus on learning about the child's likes, dislikes, thoughts, and feelings. This personalised approach is essential for fostering self-efficacy, the belief in one's own ability to succeed in specific tasks. Children in OOHC often require additional support to develop self-efficacy, given the cumulative impact of trauma, instability, and disrupted schooling (Knight & Rossi, 2018). The encouragement and recognition provided by mentors help to strengthen children's sense of capability and worth.

Reading motivation provides a useful example. Some children may begin the program already enjoying reading but needing support to progress, while others may be reluctant due to difficulty or lack of engaging material. When mentors listen, adapt, and affirm the child's effort, such as finding books that match their interests or

celebrating small gains, the child experiences reading as enjoyable and relational rather than obligatory. This builds confidence and willingness to take learning risks, which is critical for long-term literacy outcomes (Knight, 2013; Maclean et al., 2024).

The themes of recognition, encouragement, and positive identity formation were strongly reinforced through the workshop. Specific dimensions included:

- Confidence: Mentors model persistence, celebrate small successes, and encourage children to try again, which fosters self-belief and willingness to take risks in learning.

- Resilience building: Mentors help children reframe mistakes as learning opportunities, building adaptive coping skills.

- Role modelling: Mentors act as positive role models, providing tangible examples of future possibilities and reinforcing hope.

- Confidence in reading: Children become more willing to engage with reading when it is framed as relational, enjoyable, and achievable.

These findings align with research demonstrating that positive identity development and recognition are key protective factors for children who have experienced adversity (Brendtro et al., 2020). For example, the CREATE Foundation (2023) notes that young people in care consistently identify the importance of being heard, recognised, and affirmed in their strengths and aspirations. The Love of Learning program provides this recognition through consistent and meaningful mentor relationships, directly addressing the gaps often experienced by children in OOHC.

Relevance

Relevance emerged as another central theme in the children's reflections on the Love of Learning program. Children consistently emphasised that learning and mentoring were most effective when activities were meaningful, connected to their own lives, and aligned with their interests.

Shared activities and interests were described as particularly important. When mentors engaged in fun, creative, and non-judgemental interactions that were led by the child, connections were strengthened, and trust deepened. These experiences not only supported relationship building, but also provided an important motivational foundation for academic and personal growth.

Choice was another important factor. Children explained that they were more motivated when they could select books, topics, or activities that reflected their own interests and preferences. This is consistent with research showing that autonomy and choice increase engagement and intrinsic motivation, particularly in literacy development (McGeown et al., 2020). For children in OOHC, who often experience limited control over major aspects of their lives, the opportunity to make choices in safe, supported contexts can also build agency and empowerment (CREATE Foundation, 2023).

Children also highlighted the importance of linking learning to real life. They explained that reading and academic activities were more meaningful when connected to practical skills and everyday relevance. For example, they described using reading to cook, complete homework, prepare for exams, or pursue hobbies. Similarly, children identified a broad range of recreational and life skill activities, from skateboarding, tennis, and bike riding to cooking and résumé writing, that they wanted to share with their Pyjama Angels. These

activities could provide a balanced rhythm of academic and recreational engagement, with physical or fun pursuits offering a natural break from focused learning.

This blending of academic and real-world activities aligns with evidence that relevance enhances persistence and achievement. When learning is perceived as useful and personally significant, children are more likely to sustain attention and effort, and to develop positive associations with education (Howard et al., 2019). The AIHW (2023) notes that children in OOHC face disproportionate educational challenges, including lower rates of school engagement and attainment. Programs that make learning relevant, relational, and enjoyable can directly counter these risks by supporting motivation, skill-building, and positive future trajectories.

Specific dimensions of relevance identified in the workshop included:

- Choice and agency: Children are motivated when they can select activities and materials that reflect their interests.

- Real-world connection: Learning is more powerful when linked to everyday contexts, practical skills, and future goals.

- Balance of academic and recreational activities: Alternating between schoolwork and fun or physical activities supports wellbeing and engagement.

- Reading as enjoyable and relational: Children respond positively when reading is experienced as shared connection rather than a task.

By ensuring that program activities are relevant to children's lives, the Love of Learning program fosters both academic outcomes and broader developmental benefits, reinforcing the program's unique contribution to supporting children in OOHC.

Journey map from a child's perspective

Mapping the journey of a new Pyjama Angel through the Love of Learning program from the children's perspective provided rich insights into the mentoring experience and highlighted key considerations for training and preparation. Children were invited to imagine the first encounters, ongoing interactions, and long-term relationship with their Angel, effectively creating a "roadmap" of what they expected, valued, and needed at different stages.

STAGE 01

Getting to know your child - When you meet your child, what will they be thinking, feeling, and doing?

When you first meet your child, they will likely be experiencing a mix of emotions and thoughts as they navigate a new situation.

It's important to remember they may have questions since they are new to the program.

What they will be thinking: A child's mind may be full of questions and worries. They might wonder, "What is a pyjama angel?", "What do they do?", "What does a PJ-angel actually do?", "What am I going to say?", and "What if I say something wrong?".

They might also be thinking about practical things, like "I hope pyjama angels get McDonalds for us", or feeling nervous about being judged.

What they will be feeling: At the beginning of the program, children often feel a combination of nervousness, anxiety, excitement, happiness, curiosity, and fear.

What they will be doing: Their actions might reflect their excitement or nervousness. For example, they could be jumping around on their toes, sitting at a table drawing, talking to siblings, or being fidgety while thinking of questions to ask. They might also be quiet and not talk much at first.

STAGE 02

Starting the program - How should you introduce yourself as the Angel? How do you explain the program?

The data provide clear guidance on how to begin the relationship and what behaviours are encouraged and discouraged.

How to introduce yourself and explain the program: the focus should be on making the child comfortable.

A good approach is to start conversations about their interests, such as favourite TV shows, sports, hobbies, subjects, movies, foods, or what they want to be when they are older.

Dos - What you should do:
- Be kind, patient, and a good listener.
- Talk to the child and ask questions, including what they want to do.
- Use polite words like "please".
- Encourage and motivate them.
- Give them time to think when working on assignments.

Don'ts - What you shouldn't do:
- Do not be mean, yell, growl, or swear.
- Don't make the child talk about things they don't want to discuss or bring up things they don't want to hear.
- Don't force them to do things they don't like or feel uncomfortable with, such as playing certain games or doing homework when they are tired.
- Avoid choosing activities without discussion or using their things without permission.

STAGE 03

A day in the life of... What sort of things would you do with your child? What activities are most fun?

A core part of the program is engaging in various activities and achieving goals together. The possibilities are extensive and can be tailored to the child's interests.

Academic and skill-building activities: A primary focus is on academic support, including help with homework, reading, maths, English, spelling, writing, and preparing for exams. You can also work on life skills like writing a resume and practicing for job interviews.

Hobbies and fun activities: Many suggested activities are purely for fun and building a connection. These include crafts, art, drawing, playing card games, baking, cooking, making jewellery, and building clay sculptures.

Sports and outdoor activities: Getting active together is another option. Suggestions include playing tennis, football, soccer, roller skating, going bike riding, learning to swim, and even bike riding.

Most fun activities: While "fun" is subjective, some of the more playful ideas mentioned include spending a whole day in your pyjamas, having PJ parties, going to a cafe, getting ice cream.

STAGE 04

What might your relationship look like over 1 year/5 years?

The children described the evolution of the relationship from initial nervousness to a deep and trusting bond. While a specific timeline isn't given, the ideal outcome of a long-term relationship is clearly defined.

A successful long-term relationship is one where the child feels comfortable, safe, happy, appreciated, cared for, and close to their Angel.

The connection should become so strong that you "feel like you've known each other for all your life" and become "such good friends".

Over time, you should be able to understand each other easily, express yourselves freely, and talk about important things. The child will trust their Angel.

STAGE 05

After you become a regular Angel - What will your child be thinking, feeling, and doing?

After spending some time together, the initial anxiety transforms into comfort and confidence.

What they will be thinking: Their thoughts will shift from worry to anticipation. They might think, "I can't wait for my Angel to come," "What are we going to do today?" and reflect positively on the relationship: "He's kind, I didn't need to worry about that back then". They will also feel lucky and appreciative to have an Angel who makes time for them.

What they will be feeling: The child will feel happy, comfortable, excited, encouraged, appreciated, cared for, and loved. A key outcome of the program is that they feel more confident and brave.

What they will be doing: Their confidence will show in their actions. They will be expressing themselves more, talking more in-depth, and even doing things out of their comfort zone. They will be actively engaged in activities and may show improvement, such as "doing better at tennis". They might confidently say, "I can do this".

Visual insights into relationships, recognition, and relevance

The visual data produced by children highlighted diverse ways in which they wished to be recognised and supported in the early stages of their mentoring relationship. Across the images, children consistently conveyed a readiness to engage with their Pyjama Angel, though this readiness was expressed in varied ways that reflected their individual identities, preferences, and needs.

Some images represented optimism and openness, with smiling children in relaxed, informal environments (such as a café or backyard), suggesting that they valued connection, conversation, and non-clinical settings as conducive to building trust.

Others reflected children's interests and personal identities, such as gaming, technology, or personal style, as central entry points for recognition by mentors, underscoring the importance of affirming these as legitimate pathways into the relationship.

The images also conveyed differences in needs for structure and support. For instance, while some children emphasised orderliness and predictability, others revealed signs of disorganisation, pointing to areas where mentors could scaffold skills in routines and self-

management. Similarly, the inclusion of companion animals symbolised children's recognition of their own regulatory needs, suggesting that mentors could support identity development not only through shared activities but also by validating children's strategies for comfort and self-regulation.

The visual data also created an additional layer of insight into how children in the program understood and experienced their relationships with Pyjama Angels. Across the images, children represented mentors as attentive, supportive, and engaged in child-led activities, often in neutral or outdoor spaces. These depictions suggest that children perceived mentors as recognising and valuing their individuality by entering into their worlds rather than imposing external agendas.

In terms of identity building, the images reinforced the importance of children being seen as capable, agentic, and worthy of attention. Depictions of shared activities and side-by-side engagement highlighted how recognition of children's strengths and interests by mentors contributed to a sense of capability and belonging.

Adriana

Gabe

Adriana

Gabe
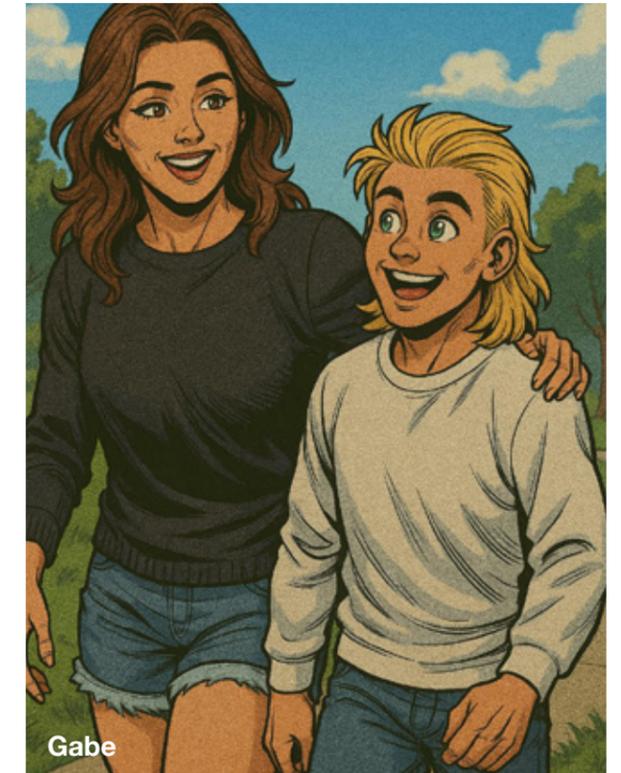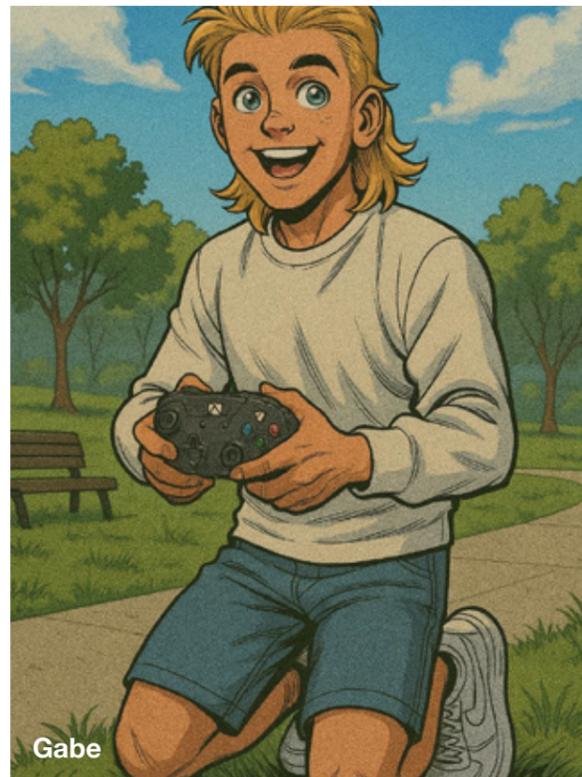
Please refer to Appendix B for a full set of generated images.

Recommendations and Implications

Findings from this process evaluation highlight the relational strength of the Love of Learning program as a key factor in its success. The emphasis placed by the Pyjama Foundation on recruiting, training, and retaining volunteers who can form positive, trusting relationships with children is central to achieving the program's outcomes. Children's reflections confirmed that relationships with their Pyjama Angels fostered identity development, self-efficacy, academic resilience, and motivation for learning.

Recommendations for practice

- **Maintain and strengthen the relational focus:** The program's success lies in the quality of relationships between children and mentors. Training for Pyjama Angels should continue to emphasise this relational approach, reinforcing that the primary aim of the role is to develop a strong, supportive connection with the child, rather than achieving set academic outcomes.

- **Support and retain volunteers:** Children consistently emphasised the importance of trust, reliability, and feeling cared for in their relationships with Pyjama Angels. These findings validate the program's focus on relational strength and highlight the need to continue supporting and retaining volunteers who can provide this stability. Ongoing support, opportunities for peer connection, and recognition of volunteers' role in building strong, safe relationships are likely key to sustaining commitment and reducing turnover.

- **Facilitating positive program beginnings** emerged as an important theme from the children's contributions. Their ideas could be incorporated into training and resources to help new Pyjama Angels establish strong, early connections. For example, AI-generated images from the workshop could be developed into a visual "activity menu," offering mentors and children accessible, engaging options that reflect children's own preferences. This approach could help children feel more agency in shaping their time with mentors and provide practical guidance for Angels. Analysis of the GenAI images and children's reflections also suggested several practice-based recommendations for mentors, including:

  - prioritising youth-chosen, activity-based sessions, sometimes outside the home,
  - blending active and calm or creative activities to support both energy release and reflection,
  - using side-by-side formats to reduce conversational pressure,
  - reinforcing progress through strengths-based feedback, and
  - gradually incorporating life-skills coaching (e.g., routines, transport, self-advocacy) as relationships deepen.

Implications for program development and evaluation

- **Embedding trauma-informed practice:** The adoption of a trauma-informed, relational approach within training and program design is clearly aligned with children's experiences of the program and should continue to underpin all aspects of delivery.

- **Innovative tools for ongoing feedback:** The booklet developed in this evaluation, or a modified version, has potential as an ongoing tool for collecting children's reflections on the program. Approaches such as empathy mapping and journey mapping allow for creative, child-friendly participation and provide rich insights into children's perspectives.

These recommendations suggest that continuing to strengthen the program's relational foundation, while providing practical resources for mentors and continuing to embed trauma-informed practice, will sustain and enhance the impact of the Love of Learning program.

- **Expanding existing evaluation instruments** to include child-friendly evaluation items on relationships, recognition, and relevance to evidence both educational outcomes and the conditions that enable them (see Appendix C).

Conclusion

Children's perspectives, choices, and creative contributions provide valuable insights into how the Love of Learning program supports children in out-of-home care (OOHC). The findings from this workshop suggest that supportive relationships, individual recognition, and relevance of activities are important aspects of the program from the children's viewpoint.

Even with a small sample, children consistently highlighted that trusting, reliable, and enjoyable interactions with their Pyjama Angels contributed to a sense of safety and engagement. Mentors were valued for noticing the child's strengths and interests, which appeared to support feelings of capability and self-worth. Children also emphasised that learning and activities were more engaging when connected to their personal interests, choices, and everyday experiences.

The workshop findings also illustrated how the program's design, including careful recruitment, training, and matching of volunteers for long-term mentorship, creates the conditions for these experiences. The volunteer nature of the program, combined with child-centred flexibility and consistency, appeared to be particularly meaningful to children, distinguishing it from other supports in the care system.

Overall, while these insights are tentative and drawn from a small number of participants, they suggest that

the Love of Learning program provides children with more than academic support. It offers a trauma-informed approach and opportunities for safe, trusting relationships, identity development, and engagement in meaningful learning experiences. These observations align with both international and Australian evidence regarding the needs of children in OOHC, including stability, connection, recognition, and relevance.

Future evaluation with larger samples will be important to explore the extent to which these program features influence children's academic outcomes, wellbeing, and longer-term trajectories. Nevertheless, the workshop highlights that programs prioritising relationship-building, individual recognition, and relevant, child-led learning may be well-positioned to support engagement, resilience, and positive experiences for children in OOHC.

For funders and policy-makers, this evidence highlights the strong potential of the Love of Learning program in addressing educational inequities while also fostering resilience, wellbeing, and long-term life outcomes for children in OOHC. By investing in this program, stakeholders are not only supporting children's immediate learning needs but also helping to shift life trajectories towards further capability and positive outcomes.
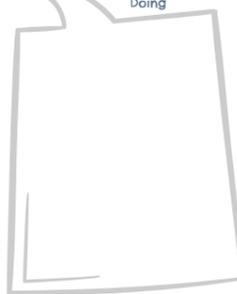
Appendices

Appendix A
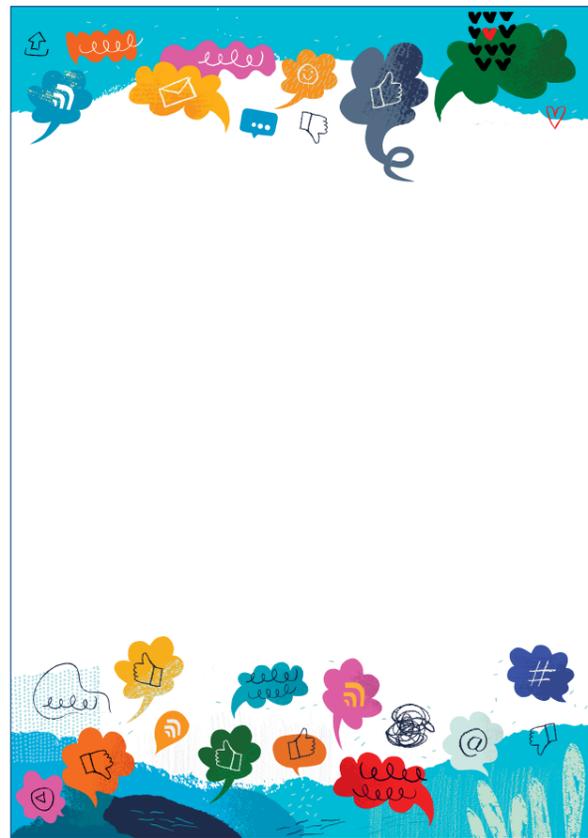
At the beginning of the program, _____ will be...
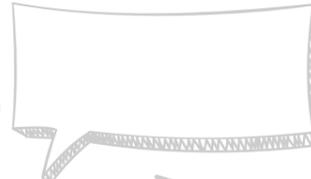
Saying

Thinking

Feeling

Doing

_____ will need help with...

1

2

3

Start talking with _____ about...

Together you and _____ can achieve

1
2
3
4
5

The do's ✔ and don'ts? ✗

The best things about a mentor...
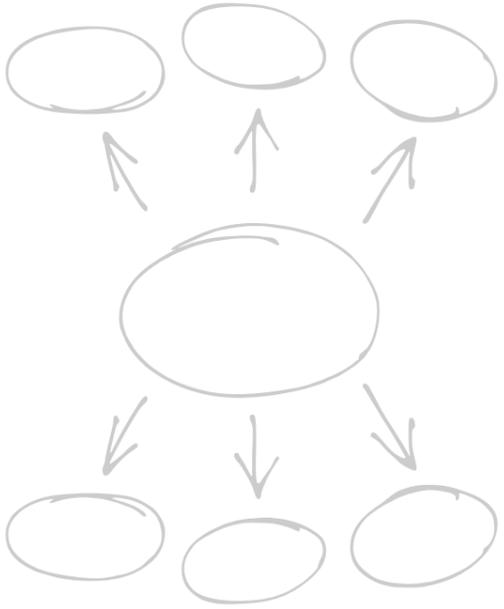
These are some activities 🐾
you and _____ can do **together**...

2
1
3
4

8
7
6
5

Activities
you should
not do are...

These things are what 🏁
a *successful* program
looks like...

After some time this is
how things will have
changed for [_____]

Saying   Thinking

Feeling   Doing

These are some TIPS 💬
to help you with _____
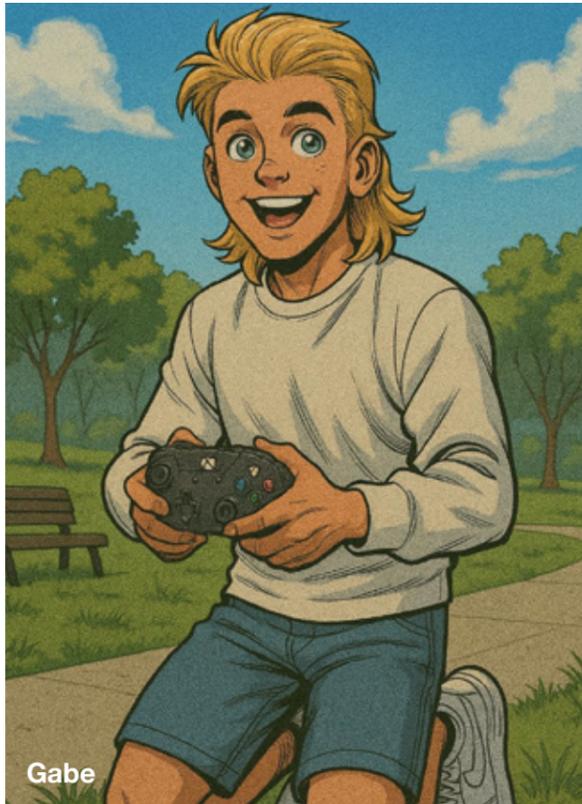reading and other things...

✅ YES!   ❌ NO!

In the future
this is what your relationship
should look and feel like...

These are the most
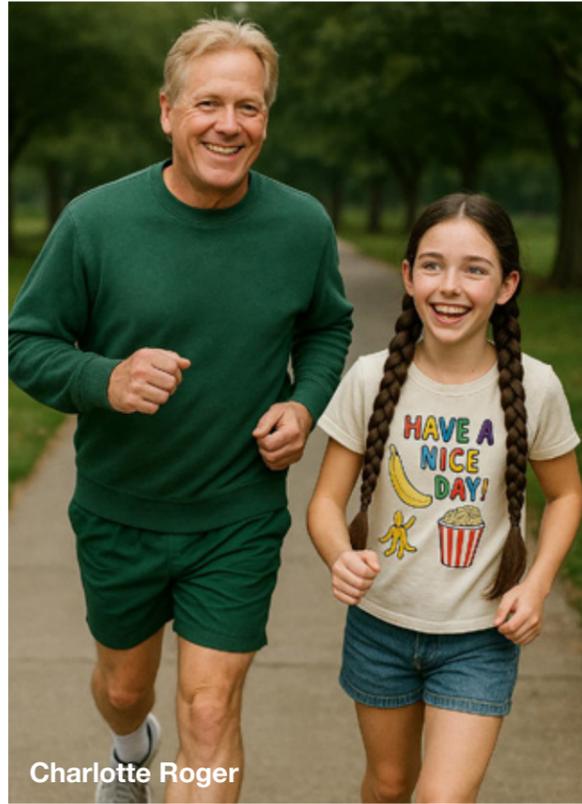*important* things _____
will need help with...

☁️ Most important

☁️ Least important

Here is a birthday card
you might get from _____

Birthday card front

Birthday card back

Natalie

Charlotte Roger

Anna

Alex

Adriana

Gabe

Dave

Natalie

Charlotte Roger

Anna

Alex

Adriana

Gabe

Dave

Proposed future evaluation questions

The Pyjama Foundation's existing evaluation instrument for children (Knight & Kingston, 2021) focuses on four protective factors that influence educational outcomes for children in out-of-home care: relational pedagogy, academic resilience, learning connectedness, and school connectedness.

The workshop findings documented in this report provide more nuanced insights into children's lived experiences of mentoring, particularly how they want relationships to develop and how they view themselves within the program. Building on these insights, the current evaluation suggests that the instrument could be amended to capture not only traditional educational outcomes but also the relational, identity-building, and motivational conditions that enable them. For example:

1. Relationships

- Do you feel like your Pyjama Angel cares about you and listens to you?
- Do you feel safe and comfortable when you are with your Pyjama Angel?
- Does spending time with your Angel make you feel happy?

2. Recognition & Identity

- Does your Pyjama Angel notice the things you are good at?
- Does your Pyjama Angel help you feel proud of yourself?
- Do you feel like your Angel accepts you for who you are?

3. Regulation & Readiness to Learn

- Does being with your Angel help you feel calmer or more focused?
- Are there activities you do together that help when you feel worried, upset, or distracted?
- Do you feel more ready to try schoolwork after time with your Angel?

4. Relevance & Engagement

- Does your Angel choose activities or books that match your interests?
- Have you tried new things with your Angel that made you want to learn more?
- Does your Angel make reading and learning fun?

5. Educational Confidence & Aspirations

- Do you feel more confident about your schoolwork since meeting your Angel?
- Has your Angel helped you keep trying, even when learning feels hard?
- Has your Angel helped you think about your goals for school or the future?

6. Program Beginnings & Continuity

- What helped you feel comfortable when you first met your Angel?
- What do you think new Angels should do to make children feel safe and welcome?
- What would make you want to keep meeting with your Angel for a long time?

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