

Bounce Back

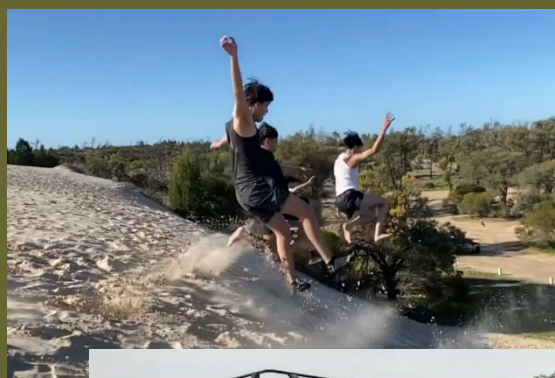
The Bounce Back project was conceived and delivered by Giz A Break, a local registered health promotion charity working to improve health and wellbeing outcomes for people at risk of, or living with, poor mental health and who do not engage well with existing services (or where no suitable services exist). Giz A Break's programs adopt an adventure therapeutic approach, which it applies through an off-road touring format.

Working with a high-risk cohort of young people (aged 14-17 years) on a referral basis, the Bounce Back project aims to reduce the likelihood of offending, re-offending and engagement with the justice system for program participants.

Through a series of intensive outdoor, adventure-based activities, participants develop skills in emotional regulation, relationship building, reasoning, collaboration and goal setting.

The program is designed around Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs and is aimed at addressing the 'Safety needs' and 'Love and Belonging' strata in Maslow's hierarchy.

As program participants progress through Maslow's hierarchy towards self-actualisation, we see the development of protective factors in key domains that span social skills, social supports, planning and prioritising, and goal efficacy.



Link to common goal

The Bounce Back program addresses the Greater Shepparton Empowering Communities common goal in three key ways.

First, by increasing participant self-awareness and aspiration, the project aims to encourage self-regulation and foster positive behaviours that move participants towards the formation and achievement of personal goals.

Secondly, by reducing anti-social behaviours by fostering a sense of community, connection and belonging, the project aims to reduce the likelihood that participants will be brought into contact with the justice system.

Thirdly, supporting at-risk young people to safely explore self-concepts through outdoor group-based experimental learning, skill building and reflection, the project aims to enhance participant social and emotional development, self-sufficiency, general wellbeing and resilience.

Project activities

The Bounce Back project plan proposed the delivery of two multi-day camps and 40 individual days out.

Following project commencement, coordinators identified a range of issues impacting the delivery of individual days out including:

- Lack of communication between primary carers and participants resulting in young people not being told about their day out by their carer at all, or sometimes only being told on the morning of departure, leading to participant refusal.

- Disorganisation of participants with conflicting school, work and youth justice commitments.
- Young people being up all night gaming and not being ready or fit to depart.
- Itinerant living arrangements - moving between family members or leaving the region without notifying project coordinators.
- Lack of communication and coordination between service providers, such as changes to mandatory youth justice appointments at short notice.
- Young people bailed with conditions such as curfews and reporting obligations that preclude project participation.
- Substance abuse, resulting in young people being too mentally impaired to participate.
- Strong preference amongst young people to spend time with selected others and/or to avoid some participants due to interpersonal conflicts.

To mitigate the impact of these factors on program delivery, the project was reconfigured to provide additional multi-day adventures and a smaller number of single-day adventures.

A summary of adventure activities delivered through the Bounce Back project is shown in Table 1.

Table 1 - Summary of project activities

Multi-day adventures	Participants
18-21 Jul '23 Vic Deserts	8
5-8 Dec '23 Grampians	8
6-8 Mar '24 Eildon	6
30 Apr-3 May '24 High Country	5
Single-day adventures	Participants
30 Aug '23 - Mt Terrible	4
31 Oct '23 - Mt Cobbler hike	6
9 Jan '24 - Mt Stirling	1
24 Jan '24 - Howqua River	1
1 Feb '24 - Howqua River	1
23 May '24 - Cathedral Ranges	7
21 Jun '24 - Strathbogie Ranges	8

Project participation

The Bounce Back project delivered adventure therapeutic programs to a total of 12 boys aged 14 to 17 years.

Project referrals

Eligible referrals to the project were received from:

- Greater Shepparton Secondary College (6)
- Rumbalara Aboriginal Co-op (3)
- Primary carers (2)
- DFFH Child Protection Services (1)

The primary reason identified for these referrals was the young person's engagement or risk of engagement with either police or the youth justice system.

As part of the referral process, referrers were asked to identify the goals they were seeking to achieve by referring the young person to the project. These included:

- Accessing additional support to reduce the risk of reoffending.
- Building confidence and social skills.
- Developing an appreciation for the consequences of choices and actions.
- Assisting the young person in making prosocial connections and help move towards positive peers and experiences.
- Connecting with positive adult role models.
- Support to regulate emotions.

Complexity of referrals

Young people referred to the project presented with complex combinations of behavioural issues and risk factors.

Key behavioural issues amongst young people referred to the project as identified by referrers included:

- School non-attendance.
- Behaviour in the school environment.
- Risk of engagement with police/courts/justice system.
- Substance use.
- Violence as perpetrator.
- Violence as victim.
- Risk of homelessness / current homelessness.
- Oppositional defiance disorder / general defiance.
- Continual poor choice making.

Nine of the young people referred to the project had been engaged with police in the preceding 12 months; one more participant had been engaged with police more than 12 months ago.

One participant had recently been released from youth detention and was subject to curfew conditions that limited his involvement to single-day activities.

Seven young people referred to the project also presented with medical diagnoses, which included:

- Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD).
- Foetal alcohol spectrum disorder (FASD).
- Anxiety.
- Depression.
- Complex post-traumatic stress disorder (cPTSD).

Participant needs

The Scale of Protective Factors (SPF) is a 24-item measure of specific social and cognitive protective factors known to impact resiliency. The questionnaire assesses four sub-scales of protective factors that confer resilience, including social support, social skills, planning and prioritizing behaviour, and goal efficacy.¹

Young people referred to the Bounce Back project were asked to complete the SPF as well as an intake survey, the results of which were used alongside conversations with referrers and carers to assist in developing an accelerated understanding of how the project could best address participant needs.

Considered in conjunction with participant medical diagnoses and their direct observations of young people enrolled in the project, coordinators determined the need to prioritise the strengthening of cognitive skills – goal efficacy and planning and prioritisation – in order to maximise program benefits for participants.

¹ Ponce Garcia, E., Madewell, A. N., & Brown, M. E. (2016). Resilience in men and women experiencing sexual assault or traumatic stress: Validation and replication of the scale of protective factors. *Journal of Traumatic Stress*, 29(6), 537-545. doi:10.1002/jts.22148

[Name removed] has started making better choices in regards to not being around drugs and chooses not to go where he knows people are using drugs.

Parent and carer feedback

Always caring making sure the kids are right and having fun and making sure the kids are doing good and in a good mental state and just caring for us.

Participant feedback

It was really good whenever we talked they would listen – they wouldn't butt in on our conversations.

Participant feedback

Project outcomes

Project outcomes were assessed using surveys of participants and their parents or carers, as well as participant exit interviews.

Participants were surveyed following each of the multi-day adventure activities gauge the development of protective factors across the four SPF domains.

At the conclusion of the project, participants were surveyed again to explore the extent to which they identified changes in their own behaviour and outlook over the duration of the program.

A survey of parents and carers was conducted after project completion asking respondents to rate the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with a series of statements about changes in the behaviour and outlook of their dependent young person over the duration of the program. This survey also provided opportunities for parents and carers to comment on specific aspects of their dependent's behaviour, including in relation to their involvement with police and behaviour in the home and school environments.

Development of protective factors

A key aim of the Bounce Back project was to foster the development of protective factors in young people known to contribute to wellbeing and resilience.

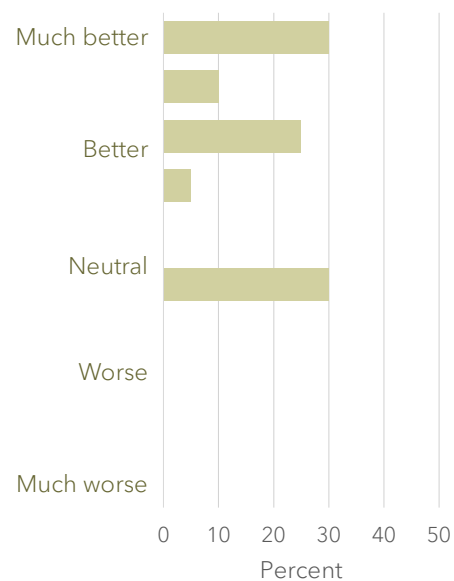
The development of these protective factors was assessed using surveys of young people administered after each of the multi-day adventures. Survey data from all multi-day adventures was aggregated prior to analysis. Young people who participated in more than one multi-day adventure completed the survey multiple times.

Did the project help to strengthen social skills in young people?

Young people were asked to compare their own social skills before and after taking part in each project activity and rate the magnitude of any change they perceived.

Responses were collected using a Likert scale that ranged from 'Much better' to 'Much worse', with a 'Neutral' centre-point. As shown in Figure 1, respondents on average reported that their social skills were 'Better' after participating in the adventure activity than they had been before.

Figure 1 - Change in social skills



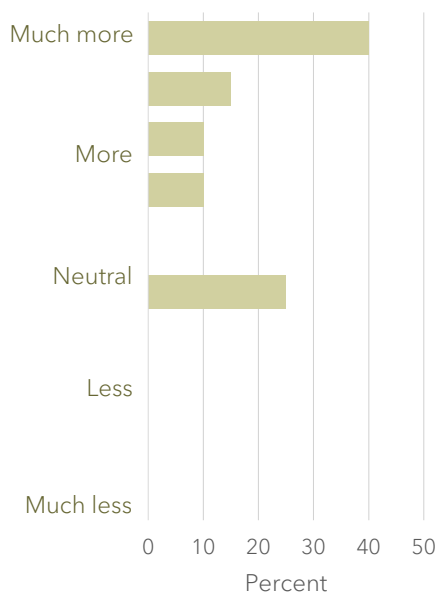
Did the project help to strengthen social supports?

Post-activity surveys asked young people to compare how supported they felt by those around them before and after the multi-day adventure and rate the magnitude of any change.

Responses were collected using a Likert scale that ranged from 'Much more' to 'Much less', with a 'Neutral' centre-point.

As Figure 2 shows, respondents on average reported that they felt 'More' to 'Much more' supported by the people around them after participating in the multi-day adventure than they had did before.

Figure 3 - Feeling supported by others



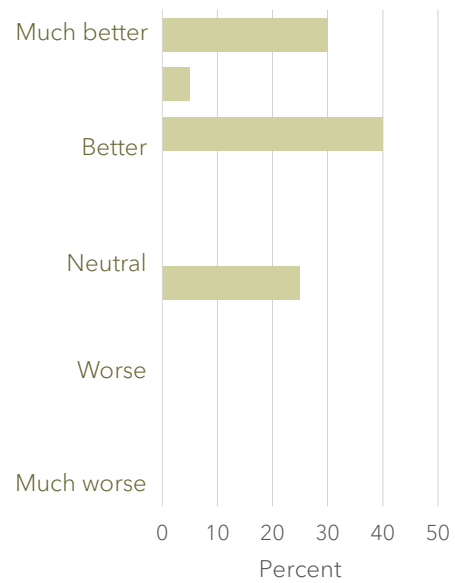
Did the project help to build planning and prioritisation skills?

Participants were asked to rate the extent to which their own ability to make a plan and prioritise tasks had changed having completed the multi-day adventure activity.

Responses were scored using a Likert scale that ranged from 'Much better' to 'Much worse' with a 'Neutral' centre-point.

Figure 3 provides a summary of survey responses, which show young people on average reported their planning and prioritisation skills were 'Better' to 'Much better' after completing the multi-day adventure that they had been before.

Figure 2 - Planning and prioritisation skills

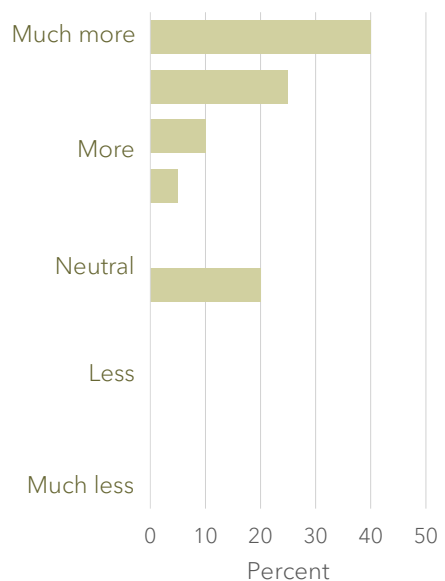


Did the project improve goal efficacy?

To explore the development of goal efficacy, young people were asked to compare their confidence in setting and achieving goals before and after completing the multi-day adventure and rate any change that had occurred.

Responses were scored using a Likert scale that ranged from 'Much more' to 'Much less' with a 'Neutral' centre-point.

Figure 4 - Confidence setting and achieving goals



As Figure 4 shows, young people on average reported feeling 'More' to 'Much more' confident in their ability to set and achieve goals after completing the multi-day adventure activity than they had before taking part in the adventure.

Changes in outlook and behaviour

Changes in the outlook and behaviour of young people who took part in the Bounce Back project were explored using a self-assessment survey, exit interviews and a survey of parents and carers.

Seven out of twelve participants completed the self-assessment survey and interview, which focused on key behavioural domains including school, home, relationships and self. Two of these participants had been engaged in the project for approximately three months, with remainder having been involved for more than six months.

Survey participants were asked to indicate the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with a series of statements about ways in which their personal behaviour and outlook had changed since participating in the project.

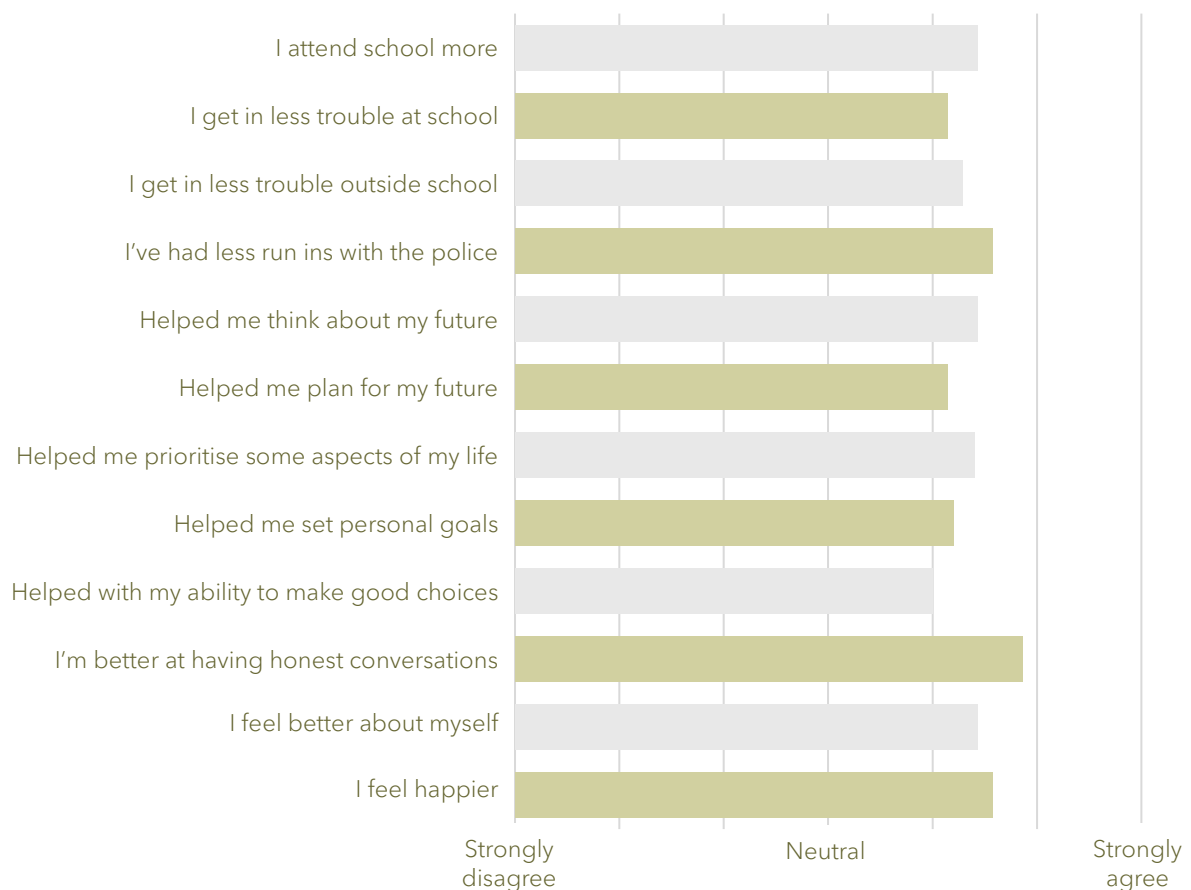
Responses to each statement were measured using a Likert scale that range from 'Strongly disagree' to 'Strongly agree', with a 'Neutral' centre-point.

On average, participants reported positive changes in response to all measures, as shown in Figure 5.

After completing the survey, participants were engaged in exit interviews to develop a richer understanding of their responses to the survey and the outcomes the project had produced.

During conversations of up to 33 minutes' duration, young people reported a variety

Figure 5 - Self-assessed changes in personal behaviour and outlook



of outcomes which they attributed to their participation in the program, including:

- Three participants commenced working during the program; two of these participants attributed this to program participation.
- One participant disposed of his motorbike as he recognised his unlawful riding was the primary reason for him being in trouble with the police.
- One participant discontinued using hard (synthetic) drugs.
- One participant with a dual diagnosis of mental health problems and substance use reported that the program worked better than a psychologist.

Themes identified by project coordinators during participant exit interviews were:

- A correlation between positive changes in participants and both time on program and frequency of participation.
- The importance of developing trust relationships between project mentors and young people.
- The adventure format provided an incentive for young people who had something to look forward to.
- The inclusion of a First Nations team member was of high importance.

Parent and carer survey

Parents and carers of project participants were surveyed to explore their perceptions of changes in the behaviour and outlook of young people since taking part in the Bounce Back project.

Seven parents and carers completed the survey, which asked respondents to rate the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with a series of statements

These camps and day trips have made a tremendous impact on my son and his overall behaviour and attitude.

Parent and carer feedback

It's a fantastic program - it's a shame it has come to an end. I hope it can still continue at some stage as it makes a difference as it has in my son.

Parent and carer feedback

He can sometimes make the wrong choices but after engaging in the program I believe that he is learning to make better choices.

Parent and carer feedback

about ways that their dependent young person's behaviour and outlook had changed after participating in the adventure program.

Responses were measured using a Likert scale that ranged from 'Strongly agree' to 'Strongly disagree, with a 'Neutral' centre-point. Survey data was aggregated prior to analysis.

On average, parents and carers reported positive changes across all nine measures included in the survey, a summary of which is presented in Figure 6.

The same survey included open-ended questions with prompts relating to the home and school environments, as well involvement with police.

Is he different at home since coming along on the adventures?

Parents and carers generally reported seeing signs of improvement in the behaviour of project participants in the home environment, mostly in the form of more open communication and positive

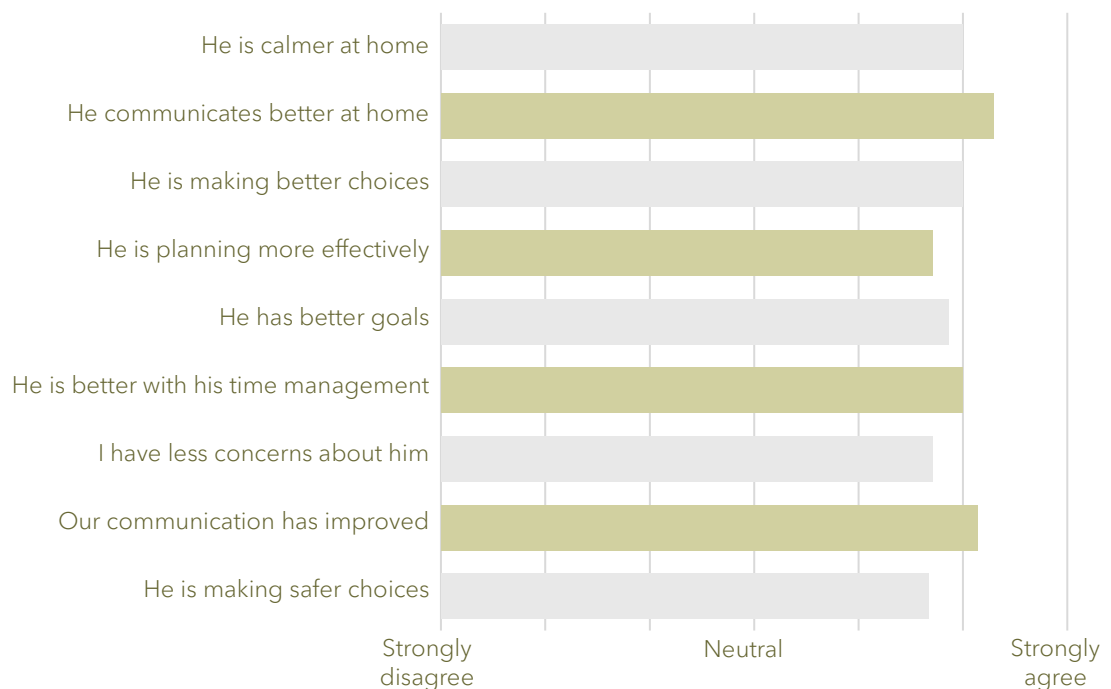
family interactions. Comments provided by one respondent in relation to a young person who had only been on a 'couple of trips' noted that these changes were modest, while another respondent indicated that the changes they saw tended to be short-lived; these comments are consistent with observations made by project coordinators of a correlation between positive outcomes in young people and the duration and frequency of their participation in the program.

What changes have you seen with school and other commitments?

Respondents identified improvements in levels of engagement with school and other commitments amongst young people after participating in the program.

Observations offered by parents and carers implicated better communication skills, confidence, maturity and attitude as drivers of change. It was also noted that having program activities to look forward to provided a meaningful incentive.

Figure 6 - Parent- and carer-assessed changes in behaviour and outlook



Is he less likely to have negative police engagement after the program?

Most parents and carers conveyed that the program had lessened the likelihood their dependent young person would be engaged with police for negative reasons.

Respondents identified that young people tended to be making better choices in relation to behaviours that might bring them to police attention. As with differences in the home environment, it was implied that regular participation in program activities over a longer period would help sustain these changes.

Discussion

The Bounce Back project successfully navigated significant complexities to achieve positive social and cognitive developmental outcomes in a high-risk cohort of young people.

The project has demonstrated how the application of an adventure therapeutic approach tailored to participant needs can foster the development of protective factors, encourage prosocial behaviour and promote a more positive outlook.

As identified by the project coordinators, these outcomes are likely to be amplified through regular, ongoing program participation.

Moving forward, priority should be given addressing the sustainability of the program, enhancing parental involvement and augmenting existing community partnerships to further strengthen the program's impact. Consideration may be given to opportunities for a broader range of activities - some that may include the parents and carers of young people already enrolled in the program.

Adapting to participant needs

As previously discussed, the project faced challenges in maintaining participant engagement due to the complex and often chaotic lives of the young people involved.

The initial plan for 40 single-day adventures had to be adjusted, resulting in fewer single-day outings and an increase in the number of more intensive, multi-day camps. This adaptation proved necessary as many participants struggled with communication breakdowns, substance use and conflicting commitments, making single-day activities difficult to manage.

Future programs may benefit from 'building in' the ability to adapt program format from the outset, allowing for the mix of single and multi-day activities to be adjusted based on the comprehensive assessment that is undertaken to determine participant needs and feedback.

Additionally, finding ways to implement more robust communication between project coordinators and both participants and their parents or carers could help mitigate last-minute cancellations and improve overall engagement.

Complexity of needs

Participants in the Bounce Back project presented with a range of complex needs, including behavioural issues, substance use, and mental health challenges such as ADHD and cPTSD. These complexities required the program to focus heavily on developing cognitive skills like goal efficacy and planning, as well as social skills. The diversity of participant needs highlights the importance of individualised support plans within such programs.

Future program iterations could consider opportunities to tailor activities to the specific needs of young people by streaming participants into activity groups based on the comprehensive intake assessments. This approach could enhance the ability to target interventions for those with dual diagnoses and significant mental health concerns, alongside general group activities.

Strengthening partnerships

The partnership with Rumbalara and the involvement of their Youth Justice Worker added significant value to the Bounce Back project, particularly in creating culturally safe spaces for First Nations participants. Collaborations such as this highlights the importance of strong community partnerships in delivering effective youth programs.

Future projects should continue to build on these relationships, potentially expanding partnerships to include other local organisations that can offer additional resources or support. This approach not only enriches the program but also helps embed it more deeply within the community, increasing its reach and impact.

Sustaining positive outcomes

The program successfully fostered improvements in social skills, goal-setting, and emotional regulation among participants, as evidenced by participant feedback, parent and carer observations and survey data. However, the sustainability of these positive outcomes over the long term remains a critical consideration.

While participants and their parents and carers reported immediate benefits, ongoing program support may be necessary to ensure that these gains are maintained.

This observation accords with insights shared by project coordinators and feedback from parents and carers about the relationship between regular, ongoing participation in program activities and the durability of changes in participant behaviour and outlook.

Future evaluations should consider including follow-up assessments to track the persistence of these outcomes and identify any areas where additional support might be needed. Additionally, implementing a structured post-program support phase, possibly involving mentorship or regular check-ins, could help to reinforce the skills and behaviours learned during the program and assist with the early identification of problems.

Parent and carer involvement

The Bounce Back project underscored the benefits of parent and carer support to successful program delivery. Post project feedback provided by parents and carers also identified opportunities to strengthen engagement with families as part of the program.

Project coordinators should consider enhancements to provide additional resources for parents and carers, such as through workshops or support groups, as well as strengthening communication between program staff and families.

Strengthening connections between the program and the home environment of participants is also likely to assist in sustaining the positive changes observed in participants.

Future programs could consider integrating family-based interventions that are aligned to developmental goals for participants, thereby creating a more holistic approach to supporting at-risk young people.