

Inquiry into volunteering in Queensland

Submission No:	340
Submitted by:	The Pyjama Foundation
Publication:	Making the submission and your name public
Attachments:	See attachment
Submitter Comments:	



VITAL VOLUNTEERS

*TURNING PAGES AND REWRITING FUTURES
FOR CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE IN CARE*

Response to the Parliamentary Inquiry into
Volunteering in Queensland
'Volunteers Make the World Go Round'

Submission by The Pyjama Foundation (February 2025)



Acknowledgement of First Australians

Here is the land and here is the sky.
Here are my friends and here am I.
We thank the Aboriginal people for the land on
which we live and play, and we promise to take
care of it, every single day.

We acknowledge the Traditional Custodians of the
lands on which our Foundation is located and
where we conduct our business.

BREAKING THE CYCLE OF DISADVANTAGE

For **over 20 years**, The Pyjama Foundation has been dedicated to breaking the cycle of disadvantage faced by children and young people in out-of-home care (OOHC). Through our Programs Love of Learning (LOL) and Teen Life Skills (TLS), we strive to offer the stability and nurturing they need to heal, grow, and thrive through consistent volunteer mentoring.

It is a non-profit community organisation founded by Bronwyn Sheehan OAM with a proven track record of creating a positive impact in the lives of children who live in foster care, 0-24 years, through a unique volunteer recruitment and retention model.

Children in care often carry the weight of profound trauma. The separation from their families alone can be deeply distressing, compounded by experiences such as physical, emotional, or sexual abuse, exposure to domestic violence, or neglect. Many have been denied the care, support, and guidance essential for healthy development, growth, and learning.

Over their lifetime children and young people in care are at greater risk of:

- Poor educational outcomes – 92% are below the reading level by age seven
- Experiencing homelessness and/or housing instability
- Experiencing significantly higher rates of mental illness compared to the general population including displaying suicidal behaviour
- Experiencing unemployment and/or underemployment
- Developing substance abuse issues
- Becoming involved in the youth criminal justice system
- Experiencing early parenthood



The Pyjama Foundation supports the Government's commitment to reinforcing and advancing the vital role of volunteering across the state.

SNAPSHOT OF IMPACT TO DATE IN QUEENSLAND



11,780

children and young people mentored in
QLD since 2004.



2,827,200

books read with children in care in
QLD since 2004.



141,360

hours of Pyjama Angel time spent with
Carers since 2004.



8,575

volunteer Pyjama Angel mentors trained in
QLD since 2004.



181,230

hours of support to Pyjama Angel
mentors since 2004.



881

children and young people in care
are currently mentored weekly by a
volunteer Pyjama Angel in QLD.



487

children currently on the waiting list
seeking their own special Pyjama
Angel mentor in QLD.



279

young people currently in the Teen Life
Skills Program in QLD.

RECOMMENDATIONS



Funding

Not-for-profits such as The Pyjama Foundation who operate with the support of volunteers should be considered for additional funding so that they are able to grow and support more disadvantaged Queenslanders.

The Pyjama Foundation needs additional funding to expand its reach and impact. Currently operations are based on the assistance of volunteers, however the Foundation faces a waiting list of over 487 children in Queensland who could benefit from our Programs. It costs approximately **\$1637 to screen, recruit, train, and provide ongoing support for each Pyjama Angel volunteer**. The Foundation's ability to grow and provide crucial support hinges on volunteer dedication and sustained financial resources, with over 80% of our income generated through fundraising efforts. Increased funding directly translates into the capacity to support more children and young people.

Our volunteers are creating brighter futures for children and young people in care, one meaningful connection at a time.

Volunteer Subsidy

The rising cost of living, particularly the increasing expense of petrol, has become a significant deterrent to volunteering, often cited as a reason for individuals discontinuing their commitment. For many volunteers, the financial burden of transport costs can be overwhelming, especially when they are unable to rely on public transport due to safety concerns or the logistical challenges of using it for evening visits. Volunteers frequently find themselves traveling long distances, sometimes to locations far from their original placements. For instance, one volunteer was initially placed with a foster child just five minutes away. Over the years, the child's placement moved progressively further, and now, after several years, the volunteer faces a 3-hour round trip for a single visit.

This escalation in travel time and costs, particularly with petrol prices rising, has made it increasingly difficult for many volunteers to maintain their commitment, resulting in reduced volunteering hours or, in some cases, discontinuation altogether. To help retain dedicated volunteers and ensure that meaningful relationships can continue to thrive, there is a clear need for volunteer subsidies to offset transport costs, enabling these valuable contributions to remain sustainable.

In addition, some volunteer roles may require additional out-of-pocket expenses, such as purchasing supplies for their visits, particularly if they do not live locally to our resource centre library. When these costs are not reimbursed or subsidised, they can become a financial burden for volunteers, particularly those with limited disposable income.

Given the limited resources of most not-for-profits, a government-run program would be advantageous. This could operate similarly to the Queensland Government's FairPlay vouchers or the School Transport Assistance Scheme. This would allow volunteers to apply for assistance through an approved provider.

VOLUNTEERS: THE HEART OF OUR ORGANISATION



The Foundation is steadfast in its belief that volunteering empowers individuals to create a positive impact and fosters inclusive, thriving communities. It applauds the Queensland Government for its dedication to conducting this Parliamentary inquiry to ensure a vibrant, inclusive, and sustainable volunteering sector in Queensland.

Volunteers are at the heart of The Pyjama Foundation, and without them, we would not be able to achieve our goal of empowering the lives of thousands of children and young people in OOHC. These vulnerable children and young people navigate a complex network of support services designed to meet their diverse needs, ranging from counselling to educational assistance; however, these services can sometimes feel impersonal and transactional due to the structured nature of paid support.

In contrast, volunteer Pyjama Angel mentors offer a unique, nurturing approach by providing mentorship **free of charge**, fostering genuine connections that transcend the limitations of traditional support systems. Committed to making a real difference in the lives of these children, Pyjama Angels dedicate their time and hearts to build trust, instil confidence, and create positive, lasting impacts.

No government, carer, agency, or support service can change the life trajectory of these children and young people alone. Collaboration is without doubt the key.

The Foundation's volunteer based mentoring model ensures that relationships built with children and young people in their formative years extend long into their adolescence. No matter if their circumstances change, through the Foundation's dedicated volunteer base they will always have one significant adult in their life.

- **99% of Pyjama Angels feel that volunteering makes them feel good about themselves**
- **82% of the children are feeling supported, connected and empowered by their Pyjama Angel**
- **92% of foster carers agreed or strongly agree that their Pyjama Angel is a valued part of their personal support network**
- **Since 2004, Pyjama Angel mentors have provided 141,360 hours of support to Queensland foster carers**

In addition, the Foundation's Programs have a proven track record and their effectiveness is backed by an independent evaluation conducted by the Queensland University of Technology. It concluded that the features that are most effective are the processes that The Pyjama Foundation uses to recruit, train, support, and retain volunteer mentors; the extensive and comprehensive assessment of those volunteers who apply to become a mentor; and the thoughtful matching process, which matches a mentor with a child for a minimum of one year. These processes are all vital for the children in OOHC who are experiencing significant change in their lives

(See Attachment A – Evaluation Report: The Pyjama Foundation's Love of Learning Program: Theory and Practice, QUT 2023).

POWER OF AN HOUR

The success of The Pyjama Foundation is based on the ongoing dedication and commitment of volunteer Pyjama Angel mentors.

There is a special and unique bond between a Pyjama Angel and their pyjama child or young person they support. This one-on-one time is precious—an opportunity for connection, encouragement, and help to heal from trauma.

Children often ask, “How much do you get paid to do this?”

Their faces light up when they hear the answer: “I do this because I want to, not for money.”

In that moment, they feel **truly valued**. They know they have their Pyjama Angel’s full attention—someone who believes in them, cheers them on, and is their biggest fan.

There is no judgment from a Pyjama Angel. In their presence, children are free to simply be themselves, without pressure or expectation. With this sense of security and encouragement, they can grow, explore, and become the best version of themselves.

Our Programs harness the extraordinary dedication of our volunteers. These compassionate individuals are carefully recruited, screened, trained, and supported to make a lasting impact on young people in OOHC. Each week, they spend invaluable one-on-one time fostering academic achievement, personal development, and resilience—unlocking the transformative “**power of an hour**”.

Through activities like shared reading, educational games, and hands-on skill building, Pyjama Angels create a safe, inspiring space for children to thrive. More than mentors, they become a source of stability, encouragement, and a catalyst for a lifelong love of learning.



To date the Foundation
has trained more than
11,000 mentors.



THE KEYS TO SUCCESS

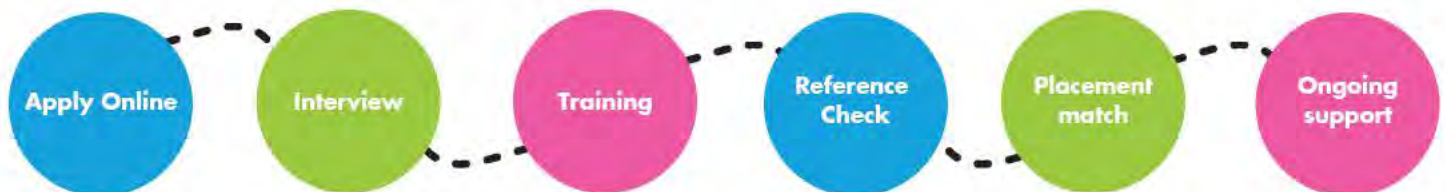
CREATING A CONSISTENT AND LONG-LASTING CONNECTION

1. ROBUST AND FAIR RECRUITMENT PROCESS

The distinctive approach to breaking the cycle of disadvantage lies in fostering a meaningful, positive, and caring relationship between each child and their Pyjama Angel mentor, alongside a unique, carefully crafted process that nurtures this bond.

Once potential volunteers are screened and assessed for suitability, The Pyjama Foundation's comprehensive one day training program prepares committed, adaptable individuals who are equipped to support their mentee. This training emphasises a trauma-informed approach, ensuring volunteers are both motivated and well-prepared to understand and respond to the unique needs of children in care. Training sessions are regularly conducted across a number of regional areas in Queensland.

Through a rigorous recruitment, screening, training, and support process, The Pyjama Foundation equips Pyjama Angels with the skills to make a lasting, positive impact. Providing a child in care with a mentor is potentially critical for their wellbeing and developmental needs. The Foundation utilises Salesforce to collect all interactions in a thorough and meaningful way ensuring privacy and the ability to analyse our impact to track the progress of Programs.





2. EMBRACING THE PACE FRAMEWORK

The principles that drive the Foundation is the use of the PACE framework:

Playfulness : This is about creating a fun, light and playful atmosphere when communicating with the child or young person. Being playful could mean having fun with shared games or a shared activity that involves both the mentor and mentee. It's about helping children and young people be more open to and experience positive connection.

Acceptance: This is about accepting that whatever the child or young person is feeling right now is acceptable. It is about listening to their thoughts, feelings and perceptions without judgement.

Curiosity : This is about approaching children and young people with an air of curiosity and seek to understand what drive them. It is about getting to the core of who they are and bringing out the best in them.

Empathy: Empathy is about putting yourself in someone else's shoes and allowing yourself to feel what they must be feeling. It gives the mentor a sense of compassion for the child or young person and their feelings. This is essential in helping them to feel understood and makes a big difference to as to how they cope.

Our Love of Learning Program integrates the PACE framework to nurture the whole child and build trusting relationships with adults. This approach encourages children to reflect on their thoughts and behaviours while highlighting their strengths. Through listening, understanding and connecting, Pyjama Angel mentors embed empathy, helping children develop essential life skills.

The results revealed a highly engaged, trauma-informed approach by the Pyjama Angels, who are using principles of PACE to mentor children in foster care.

98%

of Pyjama Angels are using PACE which is a trauma-informed approach to working with children in foster care

97%

are creating child-centred interactions with the child increasing engagement in the relationship and giving them autonomy over what activities they do together

99%

of the Pyjama Angels are using child-centred discussions and active listening to engage the child in fun and learning activities to build a positive mentoring relationship

3. BEING TRAUMA INFORMED AND EVIDENCE BASED

A recent review by QUT proved that the Foundation is both trauma-informed and evidence-based. This approach to breaking the cycle of disadvantage lies in fostering a meaningful, positive and caring relationship between each child/young person and their Pyjama Angel and a unique carefully crafted process that facilitates this bond. Once potential volunteers are screened and assessed for suitability, The Pyjama Foundation's comprehensive training program emphasises a trauma-informed approach, ensuring volunteers are both motivated and well prepared to understand and respond to the unique needs of children in care. In addition, our commitment to being evidence-based means actively integrating the latest research and proven strategies to enhance literacy, social and emotional competencies.

4. PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

The Foundation provides regular professional development sessions for Pyjama Angels which are crucial to enhancing the support provided to children and young people in care. Equipping them with the latest tools, information and techniques fosters a growth mindset and assists when facing challenging issues.

5. PHONE ADVISORY AND SUPPORT SERVICE

This service provides:

- Recommendations for books, games and activities to create engaging visits
- Strategies for using trauma-informed approaches
- Advice on handling challenges or sensitive situations
- Culturally respectful guidance for working with First Nations and diverse communities
- Tips on resilience, confidence building and mental well-being



6. VOLUNTEER RESOURCE PORTAL

This is a dedicated online support channel for Pyjama Angels to find new resources to use with their Pyjama Child including recording of professional development sessions, staying updated with the Foundation, helping them to feel supported, connected and engaged.

7. COMMITMENT AND RECOGNITION

Annual Volunteer Pyjama Angel of the Year Awards, held across 12 locations, is one way the Foundation recognises and celebrates the extraordinary contributions of our volunteer mentors and their dedication to making a difference to our communities most vulnerable children and young people.

8. LONGEVITY OF PLACEMENT

There is evidence that there are positive benefits of having a long-term mentor (significant adult) who continues to support the child or young person for an extended period which contributes to improved psychological, behavioural and educational outcomes. The average length of a placement is 3.5 years with multiple relationships which have extended longer than five years.

9. ATTRACTING ADDITIONAL FUNDING

The Pyjama Foundation's volunteer mentor base serves as a powerful asset in attracting funding and fostering staff engagement. Potential funders are often drawn to organisations with demonstrated community impact and a committed volunteer network. Promoting staff volunteering opportunities with the Foundation provides a meaningful avenue for employees to contribute to a worthy cause, fostering a sense of social responsibility and boosting staff morale, which enhances the appeal to potential funders and solidifies long-term sustainability.



10. MEASURING IMPACT

Since 2011, The Pyjama Foundation has been conducting research to ensure our Programs are resulting in the most positive outcomes possible. This evaluation continues The Pyjama Foundation's commitment to understanding our volunteers and program using an evidence-based approach.

Four principles The Pyjama Foundation is using to create the optimal conditions for children to experience positive change:



A committed mentor

The recruitment, screening, and training of committed and adaptable volunteers who effectively understand their role.



Thoughtful matching

A thoughtfully managed process for matching children and mentors, with ongoing support, monitoring, and evaluation.



Positive mentoring relationship

A trauma-informed approach where children are engaged in learning through the positive and caring relationship that they develop with their mentor.



Individualised child-centred activities

Activities that are individualised and focus on children being given empowerment, voice, and choice. Regular feedback mechanisms for mentors, foster carers, and children.



HOW DO PYJAMA ANGELS SPEND THEIR VISITS?

Volunteering with children and young people opens their world to a world of new and rewarding experiences that can profoundly shape their perspectives and aspirations. When adults take the time to engage with young minds, they introduce them to diverse activities, ideas, and opportunities that they may not encounter in their everyday lives. These interactions can ignite curiosity, inspire creativity, and foster critical thinking, helping children to explore their interests and potential. By providing a supportive and enriching environment, volunteers help children expand their horizons, cultivate their passions, and build meaningful relationships, ultimately empowering them to embrace life's possibilities with enthusiasm and hope. Pyjama Angels do this by engaging in a wide range of fun and educational activities.



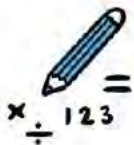
84%

reported working
on literacy skills



81%

worked on activities
that build a sense of
self and self-awareness



47%

worked on numeracy
skills



53%

worked on health and
fitness



51%

worked on social
science



66%

worked on motor skills



60%

worked on the arts



76%

worked on social skills

MEASURING OUR IMPACT

For the last five years the Foundation has worked with QUT and more recently the Haines Centre for Strategic Management to develop a Theory of Change and an Impact Measurement Framework.

This allows the Foundation to make informed decisions about programs and using the findings to demonstrate the impact of mentoring children and young people in OOHC.

We collect insights from a diverse network of stakeholders, including children and young people, foster, kinship, and residential

carers, child safety and agency workers, volunteer mentors, workshop attendees, internal staff, and valued supporters.

Utilising a variety of channels—such as database records, placement communications, surveys, interviews, and feedback forms—we ensure a comprehensive and holistic understanding of our impact. This approach allows us to continually refine our Programs and enhance outcomes for the children and communities we support.

QUT recently conducted an independent evaluation of the Love of Learning program. Two significant conclusions were:

1. QUT's report highlights the important role The love of Learning programs plays within the child protection system. The Pyjama Foundation is a critical stakeholder contributing to the safety, support, and care of children by providing them with a volunteer mentor who works to develop a relationship with foster carers and children that is characterised by safety, trust, collaboration and mutuality. Foster carers provide regular feedback so The Pyjama Foundation can monitor and improve the child's experience and evaluate the program's impact.

2. By reviewing the theory underpinning the program and feedback from stakeholders, QUT's evaluation has found that the program is evidence-based and trauma-informed. A well-managed and thorough process is being used to recruit and support volunteer mentors who focus on key protective factors that help children in out-of-home care combat social and educational disadvantage. These include literacy skills and a positive attitude towards reading and learning.

By being a community engagement program, the Love of Learning program is providing opportunities for people to participate in their community through volunteering, and for children in out-of-home care to experience a positive sense of identity and agency.

VOICE OF THE PYJAMA ANGEL MENTOR

The benefits of volunteering are wide-ranging, which is why becoming a volunteer Pyjama Angel mentor is such a powerful way to boost personal growth and development and also experience a sense of gratification and meaning from helping others.

A recent survey revealed:

98%

feel they
personally benefit
from being a
volunteer

99%

feel that
volunteering makes
them feel good
about themselves

62%

think volunteering
with The Pyjama
Foundation is a
good way to make
new friends

59%

feel less lonely
and isolated
when
volunteering



VITAL VOLUNTEERS

Pyjama Angel mentors come from a variety of backgrounds, but what unites them is their compassionate nature and dedication to changing lives. No matter where they're from or what they do, they share one special mission: **to be a positive role model and a constant source of encouragement for kids in care**. These amazing volunteers bring so much kindness and fun into the Foundation's Programs, creating connections that change lives.

18-85

Age Range

Gender



87%

Female

10%

Male

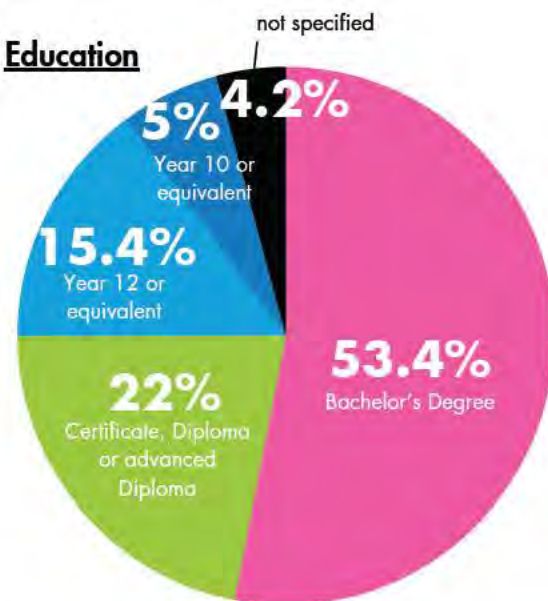
3%

Non-Binary/Unspecified

In Queensland Pyjama Angels are placed in the following areas:

Southeast Queensland : Brisbane – MBRC,
Sunshine Coast
North and Central Queensland: Cairns, CQ,
Mackay, Townsville, Wide Bay Burnet
South Queensland : Gold Coast, Ipswich, Logan,
Toowoomba

Education



Top Employment Sectors



21%

Education and Training



13%

Healthcare & Medical

See Attachment B Case Study: Lauren's Pyjama Angel Journey: A Life Changing Connection.

QUOTES FROM PYJAMA ANGEL MENTORS

"I have gained a lifelong friendship with an amazing young woman. I share in the joys and achievements that she has worked hard for over the years. And I'm sure there will be many more to come."

"I see his confidence improving as I see him complete tasks and this makes my heart sing."

"It is particularly rewarding to see the development of the child and see them gain confidence and enjoy things they previously found daunting. Sometimes it just takes a little bit more time explaining things on a one-to-one basis to make the learning experience easier and enjoyable."

"Being a Pyjama Angel is BY FAR the best way I spend my time."

"It is such a pleasure to see him now, a young man with a bright future. I am so proud of his achievements and for always trying his best. The most well-mannered and enthusiastic young man, who is socially a delight to everyone."

VOICE OF THE FOSTER PARENTS

FOSTER AND KINSHIP CARERS' PERSPECTIVES ON THE LOVE OF LEARNING PROGRAM

The Pyjama Foundation engaged Foster and Kinship Carers, many with over a decade of experience, to participate in a survey and share their insights on the LOL Program and the valuable contributions of Pyjama Angel mentors. Foster carers play a vital role in the lives of children and young people but encounter numerous challenges, such as adapting to new circumstances, engaging with birth families, and managing difficult behaviours. Additional support from a visiting Pyjama Angel offers them a valuable opportunity to discuss any issues they might be facing. Carers highlighted the importance of the partnership between themselves and the Pyjama Angels, emphasising their playfulness, consistency, curiosity, and unwavering support. **Carers particularly valued the individualised attention and quality time Pyjama Angels dedicate to foster children, acknowledging their significant role in enhancing learning and development, which is free of charge.**

Key Survey Findings

The Importance of Pyjama Angels:

- **92%** of carers believe it is important or very important for their foster child to have a Pyjama Angel mentor.

Part of a Support Network:

- **92%** of carers agreed or strongly agreed that their Pyjama Angel is a valued part of their personal support network.

Program Recommendation:

- **88%** of carers said they would definitely recommend The Pyjama Foundation to another carer.

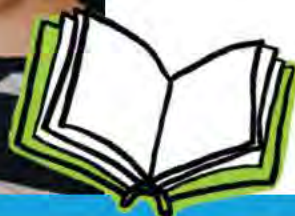
Regular Engagement:

On average, carers engage in conversations with Pyjama Angels for up to 30 minutes each week, receiving personal support during their visits to mentor a foster child.

Holistic Support:

Carers reported receiving practical and emotional support from Pyjama Angels, with many describing their Angels as trusted friends and an integral part of the family's support system.

These findings underscore the profound impact of the LOL Program, not only on foster children, but also on the carers who nurture them. Pyjama Angels provide a unique blend of mentorship, emotional connection, and practical support, creating a meaningful partnership that benefits the entire household. The overwhelmingly positive feedback highlights the Program's success in enhancing the well-being and development of children while supporting carers in their vital role.



QUOTES FROM FOSTER CARERS



"We are just very grateful to be part of this incredible Program and to have been connected to an amazing Angel. So many people have let him (Pyjama Child) down, but she has never.

She is so flexible with what activities they do, adapts for his learning struggles and focuses on his strengths. She is a real cheerleader for him. We'd all be lost without her."

"A sounding board and someone to help with ideas."

"Dedicated and highly professional Angels that have our kids best interest at heart. I have nothing but praise."



I cannot imagine fostering without the support of The Pyjama Foundation, over the 20 years we have been foster parents they have done so much for our children.





For any questions, please contact our Head of Partnerships and Fundraising:

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The Pyjama Foundation's Love of Learning Program: Theory and Practice.



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Suggested citation:

Knight, R. L., L'Estrange, L., Campbell, S., Kingston, K., and Balczun, M. (2023). *The Pyjama Foundation's Love of Learning Program: Theory and Practice*. Australian Centre for Philanthropy and Nonprofit Studies (ACPNS), QUT, Brisbane.

QUT acknowledges the Turrbal and Yugara, as the First Nations owners of the lands where QUT now stands. We pay respect to their Elders, lores, customs and creation spirits. We recognise that these lands have always been places of teaching, research and learning. QUT acknowledges the important role Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people play within the QUT community.

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Executive Summary

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 was conducted to review the approach, systems and processes currently used to design and implement the program, and to identify the program's distinctive approach to supporting children in OOHC.

This approach, and the play-based tools being used by mentors, are important as OOHC children have commonly experienced some form of trauma (e.g., physical, sexual, emotional, or psychological abuse, and/or general neglect),^[1] If unsupported in the healing and resolution of these experiences, children can have an increased risk of negative emotional, behavioural, neurobiological, and social outcomes, in turn, leading to negative life trajectories and disadvantage.^[2] Research indicates that children who have experienced trauma can be chronically in 'self-defence' mode, so providing a consistent degree of safety and trust can support them to develop interpersonal, cognitive, and regulatory competencies and experience a shift in identity from failing to achieving.^[3, 4]

The evaluation identified four interconnected principles that The Pyjama Foundation uses in the Love of Learning program: committed volunteer 'Pyjama Angels', the

matching process to connect mentors and children, the relationship between the mentor and the child, and individualised child-centred activities. By reviewing the theory underpinning the program and feedback from stakeholders, the evaluation has found that the program is evidence-based and The Pyjama Foundation is using a well-managed and thorough process to recruit and support volunteer mentors who wish to have a positive impact on the life of a child in OOHC.

Providing a child in OOHC with a mentor is potentially critical for their wellbeing and developmental needs so the next step is for The Pyjama Foundation to collect further feedback and data to verify the outcomes and longer-term impacts of the program. This will enable The Pyjama Foundation to assess whether the program is being effective in meeting its aims and objectives.

The Project

Purpose

QUT's Australian Centre for Philanthropy and Nonprofit Studies was asked by The Pyjama Foundation to review the Love of Learning program. The program is The Pyjama Foundation's principal program which operates across Australia in Queensland, New South Wales and Victoria.

QUT researchers used an appreciative enquiry approach to:

1. Review the theory of change underpinning the Love of Learning program.
2. Explore how the program has been designed and is managed.
3. Identify the program's distinctive approach to supporting children in OOHC.
4. Evaluate if the program is using a trauma-informed and child-centred approach.

The project was conducted in 2022–23 with ethics approval from QUT's ethics committee (approval no. 5066).

Scope, method, and limitations

This project analysed relevant literature and data collected and supplied by The Pyjama Foundation, including data from a survey of 300 volunteer mentors. The evaluation team also conducted six key informant interviews and two focus groups with Pyjama Foundation staff and volunteers, and reviewed the mentor training program. Further details about methods and data used in the evaluation can be found in Appendix 1. Direct involvement with children, volunteer mentors, foster carers, teachers, and other stakeholders is outside the scope of this evaluation. However, the evaluation team reviewed feedback The Pyjama Foundation received from these stakeholders, and included some details of this feedback in this report. This project's scope did not include evaluating the outcomes for stakeholders, but this is the next step for The Pyjama Foundation which will help verify if the program is achieving the desired impact.

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 'Pyjama Foundation staff', 'child', 'mentor', and 'foster carer' rather than by name to protect anonymity.

Introduction

The context

In 2004 The Pyjama Foundation established the Love of Learning Program with the aim of protecting children in OOHC from experiencing a range of health, educational, economic, and social risks that may negatively impact them throughout their lives and prevent them from thriving in school and life. Approximately 46,200 children in Australia are living in OOHC, which includes foster care, residential care, and kinship care provided to children and young people who cannot live in their family home. While some children might only stay a short time in OOHC, most children (82%) have been continuously in OOHC for one year or more. Approximately 19,500 of the children in OOHC are Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander.^[1] While there are various reasons why children are placed in OOHC, many children who have been removed from their parental home have a range of complex needs and challenges.^[6]

Understanding the systems that exist for children in OOHC helps to recognise the context within which these children are living, which is known to influence their ability and/or willingness to engage with support programs or interventions.^[6] The strengths and failures of systems can influence outcomes being achieved for children, and for

this reason, well-functioning systems pay particular attention to nurturing and sustaining acts of cooperation, coordination, and collaboration among all levels of stakeholders, including those managing programs that aim to achieve positive outcomes for children and families within the system.^[7]

Within the child protection system (Figure 1), The Pyjama Foundation is one stakeholder contributing to the safety, support, and care of children. The Pyjama Foundation works within the Allied Systems. The child's background, culture, trauma and OOHC experience, as well as their carer, school, other organisations, and local community (allied systems) can either support or prevent the Love of Learning program achieving positive outcomes. While a community-based mentoring program is just one program in which a child in OOHC might participate, it could be the most important influence in the child's life. Such a program could be the protective factor needed for children in OOHC who might otherwise disengage and fail at school due to home and school instability, as well as poor mental health and difficult attachments.^[8]

Figure 1 Overview of the child protection system

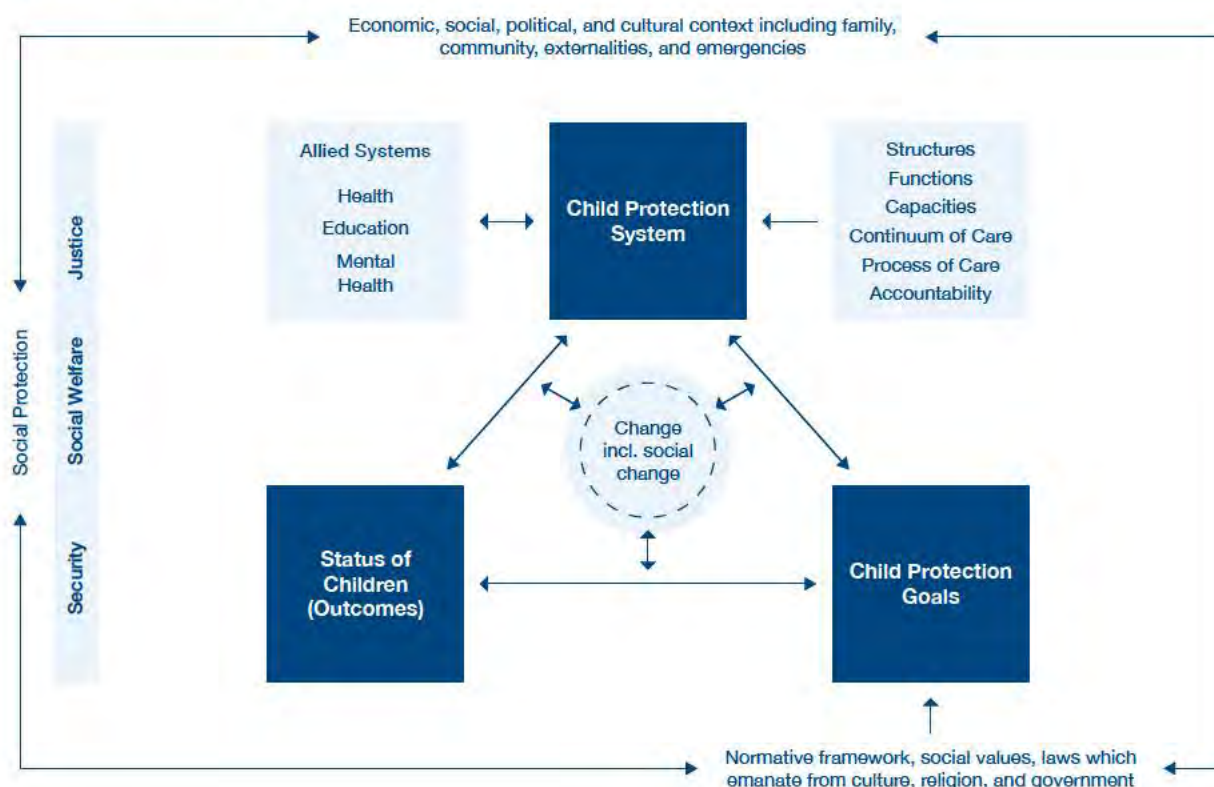


Image adapted from Wulczyn et al., (2010).^[7]

“Our Pyjama Child is building her confidence and self-esteem. Reading and writing have come a long way.”

Foster carer

Table 1 *Child protection stakeholders, needs and factors*

Foster carer	Kinship family	Child Safety	Allied health professionals	Teachers and educators	Community support organisations	Cultural and informal support network
CHILD						
Child developmental needs: Self-concept, emotional and behavioural development, health, secure relationships, resilience, cultural connection, community connection.						
Family and environmental factors: Stability of home and school, community resources, family history and functioning, social connections, access to support.						

Table 1 shows the numerous stakeholders that are working to support the child in OOHC with their developmental needs as well as the family and environmental factors that affect the child's life. Stakeholders support the child with the shared goals of providing immediate care and protection, but also to prevent a child becoming part of the youth justice system,^[9] or experiencing poor mental health.^[10] They are also working to reduce the incidence of homelessness, and drug and alcohol use, which have long-term health, social, and economic impacts.^[11] The high risk for children in OOHC experiencing poor mental health and homelessness indicates that the systems that aim to support children in OOHC and reduce negative outcomes still have a lot of work to do and that “multi-agency responses are key to both the individual and community level crime prevention and early intervention.”^[12, 13] It has been estimated that significant social impact and cost savings could be achieved over time through child protection services and community organisations working together to support children in OOHC.^[12, 14]

Another concern for children living in OOHC is their educational outcomes, which are consistently worse than their peers.^[15-17] This educational disadvantage is also a risk factor for future psychosocial concerns in adult life,

including suicidal ideation, criminality, homelessness, substance misuse, and unemployment.^[8, 18] Educational disadvantage occurs because children in OOHC often fail to meet appropriate academic milestones,^[19] regularly move foster homes and have multiple school changes during the course of their education.^[20]

Protective factors that help combat educational disadvantage include literacy skills and a positive attitude towards reading and learning.^[21] Research suggests these attitudes develop in the home before a child starts school, and those children who have a positive attitude to reading gain better literacy skills than those children who do not like reading.^[22-25] For this reason, children who have an adult read to them or with them, and who gives them access to a range of reading material, often have a more positive attitude towards learning to read. Additionally, reading books for pleasure can have a significant impact on reading development, and academic skills and outcomes.^[26-28] Literacy is so important that some argue that the role of literacy, including oral, print, numeracy and cultural literacy, is a determinant of equity; therefore protecting children in OOHC includes providing them with safe environments that encourage literacy skills and reading for pleasure.^[29]

Findings

Love of Learning Program overview

The Love of Learning program was designed and developed to address the social and educational disadvantage that many children in OOHC experience. The program provides participating children with a mentor and role model who can focus on improving their literacy in a safe and inclusive way. The Pyjama Foundation states, “A Pyjama Angel’s role is to provide consistent love and support, and most importantly, instil a love of learning in children”.^[30]

A child in OOHC is referred to the program by either their foster carer, Child Support Officer, or foster care agency. The child is then matched with a mentor trained by The Pyjama Foundation. The mentors are unpaid volunteers aged between 18 and 84 years who have a range of motivations for wishing to become a volunteer. Once a person applies to become a volunteer, they are screened, trained, and supported to mentor a child for 12 months or more. Children can choose to leave the program at any time, but the mentor can continue mentoring as long as they, the child and the foster carer believe that the mentoring relationship is positive and beneficial for the child. Some mentors continue mentoring for more than five years.

The Pyjama Foundation’s CEO oversees the team who manage the program, including a Chief Operations Officer, National Program Manager, National Volunteer Manager, Volunteer Trainers, Screening and Compliance Manager, Regional Coordinators, a Placement Coordinator, and Program Support staff. This team is responsible for managing risks, providing mentors with support and resources, and collecting feedback from children, mentors, and foster carers. The CEO is accountable to the Board of Management. A First Nations Advisory Body also provides advice to Pyjama Foundation on issues related to children in OOHC from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander backgrounds.

As at June 2023:

More than **10,500** volunteer mentors have been screened and trained since 2004.

19,035 children in OOHC have been matched with a mentor.

The average length of a match is **3.5 years**.

88% of mentors continue mentoring beyond 12 months.

Children identify as **male** (44%), **female** (55%) and **nonbinary or undisclosed** (1%).

Children are aged between **1 and 18 years**.

9% are under 5 years.

63% are between 6 and 12 years.

26% are between 13 and 17 years.

2% are older than 18 years.

33% of children identify as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander.

8% of children are from Culturally and Linguistically Diverse backgrounds.

“I have trouble a lot and [my mentor] always puts me back on track. She tells me to go back and read again if I make a mistake. I am a better person now.”

Pyjama Child

Journey map

There are six key stages (summarised in Figure 2) that children go through from referral to The Pyjama Foundation to graduation from the Love of Learning Program. While each child is different, with unique needs, questions and emotions, these key stages, and the common emotions and questions associated with each stage, have been identified by The Pyjama Foundation staff who speak to the foster carers and review feedback from the children.

Figure 2 Journey map for a child in The Love of Learning program

	Referral	1-6 months	12 months	1-5 years	5+ years	Graduation
Actions	The child learns about the program, reads information, and asks questions. The child agrees to participate.	The child meets their mentor who focuses on building rapport and trust. The child is encouraged to plan activities and set goals.	The child is supported to develop their love of learning and celebrate achievements. The child is encouraged to give regular feedback.	The child continues to set goals and celebrate milestones. The mentor continues to provide a caring and consistent relationship with opportunities for the child to give feedback.	The child works on longer-term goals. Depending on their age and/or circumstances, visits from their mentor may become less frequent. Regular feedback is encouraged.	The child exits the program. This may be due to changing circumstances or choice. The child is invited to provide feedback.
Common emotions	Curious Scared Excited Fearful Hesitant Uncertain Dismissive	Hesitant Shy Hopeful Doubtful Withdrawn Resistant Happy Expectant	Happy Excited Possessive Motivated Resistant Anxious Relaxed Safe	Connected Comfortable Assertive Respected Accepted Trusting Loved Safe	Comfortable Confident Secure Excited Anxious	Anxious Sad Happy Hopeful Confident Angry Rejected Confused
Common questions	What's the program about? Who is a mentor? Will they like me? Will I like them? Will they make me do homework?	What are we doing today? How long are you staying? When are you leaving? Are you coming again?	Why do you visit? Do you get paid to do this? Will you stay longer? Do you still like me?	How long will you be in my life? Can we do something more exciting?	Can you come to my birthday party or school graduation? Am I getting too old for a mentor?	Does this mean I won't see you again? Why has this happened? What have I done? Can I get another mentor?

Theory of change

Developing a program logic and theory of change helps organisations to discuss and clarify important questions about what they are doing and why. It enables them to create a common understanding about the goals of the program, when and why change occurs, and who experiences change. A theory of change is often a simple explanation about what a program is aiming to achieve, but a great deal of discussion is needed about the complexity of change and the wider systems and stakeholders that influence outcomes and the impact on program participants. A theory of change supports organisations to discuss their assumptions about the program and consider the external factors that can impact on the program and intended outcomes.

How a theory of change is designed and evaluated can vary greatly, but when using systems thinking, organisations must consider how change happens in the context of the broader systems. These considerations are critical when answering questions like: 'Does the program work?', 'For whom?', and 'Under which conditions?'^[31] Systems thinking encourages organisations to consider how individuals, groups, organisations, and institutions work together to influence behaviours and change, and identify where a small amount of change can cause a large change for individuals and communities.^[32]

Initially, the Love of Learning program's theory of change was developed on the theory that a volunteer reading to children would help these children improve their literacy. While there is still good evidence in the literature to support this theory,^[23] The Pyjama Foundation has updated the program's theory of change in light of their learning about the program over the years, and by using systems thinking and reviewing the literature and feedback from stakeholders.

"To ensure that children in care achieve their potential, we deliver The Love of Learning Program. This program provides a mentor who engages and supports a child in care at home each week using reading, educational and social activities. The activities aim to improve their behaviour at school, along with their general attitude towards learning and education. Our goal is to support children in care to love learning, and in the process build their self-efficacy and resilience so they are well equipped to respond to life." ^[33]



In 2023 the program continues to evolve and now places more emphasis on the relationship between the mentor and the child because the evidence suggests that a close, enduring connection with a mentor, or significant adult, helps to create the best environment for learning to occur. This has been highlighted by researchers such as Rhodes and DuBois (2008): "Beneficial effects are expected only to the extent that the mentor and youth forge a strong connection that is characterised by mutuality, trust, and empathy. For this type of bond to arise, mentors and youth must spend time together over a consistent basis over some significant period of time."^[34]

The Pyjama Foundation recognises that educational disadvantage experienced by children in OOHC is a complex social problem, which needs to be addressed in multiple ways by many organisations within the child protection, health, education, and community ecosystem. The organisation also recognises that working in partnership with other stakeholders in a child's life is paramount to the effectiveness of protecting children and meeting their needs. Using systems thinking, The Pyjama Foundation has been able to reflect on the root causes of educational disadvantage, which are often intractable and impacted by changing family and community circumstances. Children in OOHC are often impacted by trauma, disability, and multiple homes and schools, which also affects their self-concept, development, and educational progress.

The Pyjama Foundation has also considered the systems in which they are aiming to influence change. The organisation is a stakeholder primarily in the child protection and education systems. However, by utilising volunteers as mentors, there is also a broader positive impact being created for volunteers and the community more widely, who benefit from an inclusive and supportive community for children in OOHC.

The children are key beneficiaries of the program. However, there is growing evidence, gained through knowledge gained from The Pyjama Foundation's feedback and evaluation processes, that other stakeholders, including mentors, foster carers, and teachers, also benefit from the program. The Pyjama Foundation through its Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning (MEL) Framework is exploring how and when these stakeholders experience positive change. This framework acknowledges how important it is to collect feedback and

evidence about the program's outcomes and discuss what is being learned, so The Pyjama Foundation team can make improvements or changes to the program as required.

The Pyjama Foundation has also considered the challenges and assumptions being made when monitoring and reporting the outcomes experienced by children. Table 2 describes some of these challenges and assumptions, which impact on whether a child experiences any of the desired outcomes and impacts.

Table 2 *Strengths, challenges, and assumptions of The Love of Learning Program*

Strengths	Challenges	Assumptions
Foster carers support the program and create opportunities for a mentor to meet a child in a safe and nurturing environment.	Mentoring children relies on mentors travelling to the homes of children in OOHC and mentors have to provide their own transport. Children can often move foster homes frequently.	Meeting the child in their foster home is a safe space that promotes reading and learning.
The Pyjama Foundation has the internal processes and systems that thoughtfully match a mentor with a child.	Volunteers become a mentor for a variety of reasons and need continual support and acknowledgement to remain as mentors for a minimum of 12 months.	Mentors are willing and able to provide consistent mentoring for at least 12 months.
Mentors use relationship pedagogy to foster the trust with the child. Trust is critical to the mentoring relationship.	Building a safe and trusting relationship with a child can take time. Like all relationships, a mentoring relationship requires commitment and effort.	Children in OOHC want a mentor. Mentors have the skills to create a safe and trusting relationship with the child.
The program uses a trauma-informed approach so that each child feels safe and supported to learn.	Mentors need to be trained in trauma-informed approaches.	The Pyjama Foundation has the processes and time to monitor feedback from children to ensure they feel safe and supported.
Using individualised, child-centred activities to help engage children.	Meeting the individual needs of children in OOHC with complex needs.	The activities improve children's self-concept and academic resilience.
Learning is a broad and inclusive concept, which means children can have agency over what and how they learn.	Recognising that children have a right to make choices and decisions and are capable of initiating their own learning.	Mentors offer activities, routines, and the physical environment so that children have a range of opportunities to make choices about what they will do and how they will do it.
A focus on shared reading provides opportunities for promoting reading engagement and reading for pleasure which is associated with literacy achievement. ^[35]	Mentors need to be trained in shared reading practices and ways to help children see themselves as a community of readers and that reading is enjoyable.	Mentors are aware of the children's interests and can align these with the book topics to support engagement with reading.
Mentors become significant adults in the lives of children, enhancing the goals of the larger systems in which the program operates.	Stakeholders within the child protection system need to work cooperatively and collaboratively to achieve their shared goals.	The program can achieve the desired outcomes.

This evaluation found that four key principles inform the Love of Learning program in providing children in OOHC with caring and consistent mentors and ultimately reducing their risk of educational and life disadvantage. These principles, working efficiently and effectively, are creating the optimal conditions for children to experience positive change (Figure 3).

The four principles are:

1. A committed mentor

The recruitment, screening, and training of committed and adaptable volunteers who effectively understand their role.

2. Thoughtful matching

A thoughtfully managed process for matching children and mentors, with ongoing support, monitoring, and evaluation.

3. Positive mentoring relationship

A trauma-informed approach where children are engaged in learning through the positive and caring relationship that they develop with their mentor.

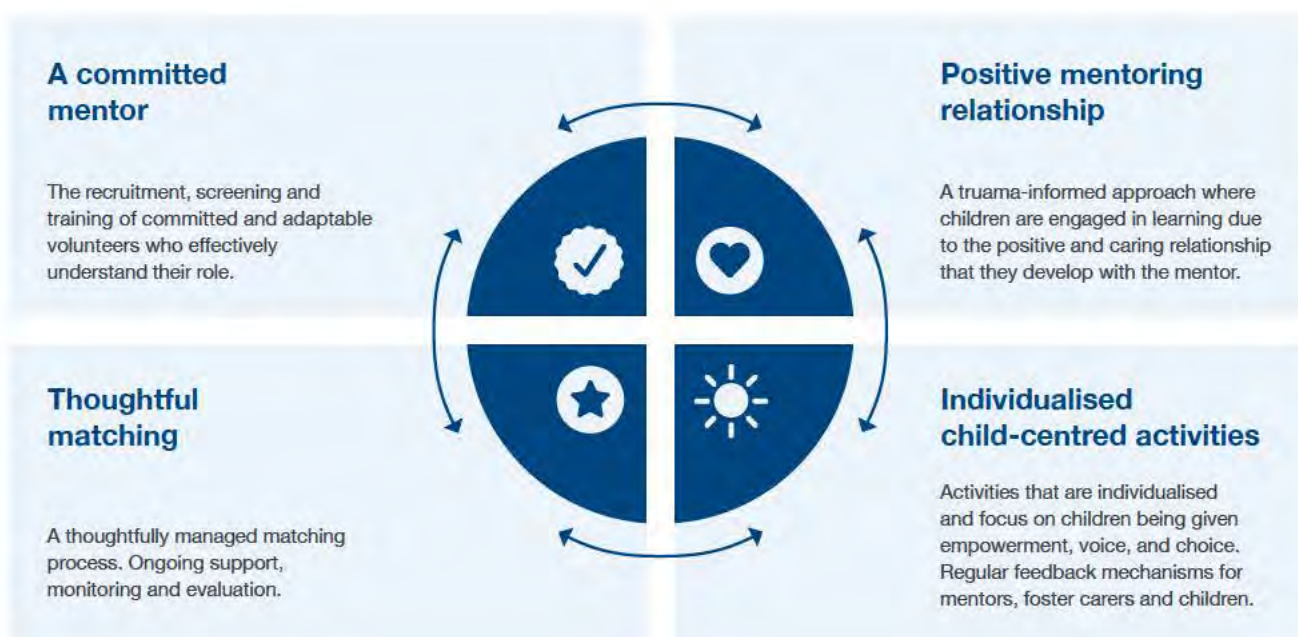
4. Individualised child-centred activities

Activities that are individualised and focus on children being given empowerment, voice, and choice. Regular feedback mechanisms for mentors, foster carers, and children.

The Pyjama Foundation applies these principles when managing the Love of Learning program, along with a number of governance policies, processes, and systems consistent with the Australian National Standards for Volunteer Involvement (Appendix 2), which provide a framework for organisations who engage and use volunteers to achieve the strategic goals and aims of the organisation.^[36] The standards support *The National Strategy for Volunteering*, which acknowledges the important role of volunteers within communities, and the mutual benefits that volunteering offers to volunteers and those who benefit from volunteerism.

The Pyjama Foundation's rigorous recruitment and training program for Love of Learning program mentors, the support and resources provided to the mentors, the regular feedback loops, and strategies to thank and recognise mentors are all evidence that The Pyjama Foundation wants volunteers to feel equipped and respected, and to know their contribution makes a difference. The risks are that mentors do not communicate with the foundation when they are struggling or need support, or when they are not adhering to the program's approved trauma-informed, child-centred approach. The Pyjama Foundation works to mitigate these risks by regular phone calls to the foster carer, reviewing feedback from the child, and monthly surveys of mentors that are reviewed by foundation staff. The Pyjama Foundation also has risk management policies and a Risk Register, which is a governance document continually updated and discussed by foundation staff and managers.

Figure 3 Four interconnected principles of The Love of Learning Program





The Four Principles

Principle 1 – A committed mentor

Principle 1 highlights the importance of a strong volunteer recruitment and management process. Volunteer mentors are required to work with children with complex needs for an extended period, so The Pyjama Foundation's recruitment and selection strategies need to be consistent and thorough to ensure that volunteers are adequately screened, trained, and prepared for their role.

Previous evaluations of mentoring programs have highlighted the benefits of mentoring in improving children and young people's health, social, and educational outcomes.^[37] The evaluations commonly show that a strong and meaningful personal connection between a child and mentor is essential. However, to ensure positive outcomes, there must also be mutual respect and support to help the child form a positive self-concept as well as opportunities for personal growth and learning.^[38, 39] This is why The Pyjama Foundation spends significant time and resources recruiting, training, and supporting committed and adaptable volunteers who effectively understand their role.

While The Pyjama Foundation does not require volunteers to have any specific qualifications or experience to apply to become a mentor, the organisation does ensure that the volunteer is committed, adaptable, and open to learning, poses no risk to children, can work independently, has resilience, and can meet the goals of the program. Once a written application is received, the applicant is invited to an individual interview and asked to reflect on their motivation and ability to volunteer, and confirm that they are committed to mentoring for a minimum of 12 months.

Interview questions include:

- Can you tell me about your understanding of what's involved in being a Pyjama Angel?
- Children in OOHC have a wide variety of backgrounds, needs, and behaviours. How would you react if, in your first four visits, the child doesn't respond warmly to you?
- What age group and gender would you like to work with and why?

The Pyjama Foundation interviewer assesses the applicant's characteristics, availability, and commitment and then asked to sign a Code of Conduct, provide a criminal history check and two personal and professional referees. These referees are contacted by phone and interviewed by a Pyjama Foundation team member.

If the applicant moves to the next stage, they are invited to a one-day, in-person training program. The training day is part of the screening process so some volunteers opt out during the training, or they are found to be unsuitable and told that their application will not progress to the final stage.

The training program aims to ensure that applicants understand their role and responsibilities, and how to protect themselves and the child from harm. Mentors who continue to mentor for more than five years are required to attend a refresher training or attend the mentor training, again with the purpose of updating their knowledge about their role, responsibilities, and Pyjama Foundation policies and procedures. Those mentors who attend the training with new volunteers add the extra value of sharing their experiences with new volunteers.

"We need to make sure when we send people to a Pyjama Child, that one, they're going to stay. And they're not going to be another person who deserts them. And secondly, that they are going to be someone that they can connect with and have fun with and learn with."

Pyjama Foundation Staff

Volunteer Mentors

The Pyjama Foundation had 1,238 active volunteer mentors in 2023, who were recruited through word of mouth, social media, community organisations, and universities. Volunteers are aged between 18 and 84 years, and they are female (90 per cent), male (8 per cent), and non-binary or did not state their gender identity (2 per cent). Over half (65 per cent) of volunteers work either full or part-time, and the remaining volunteers (35 per cent) are typically students or volunteering during retirement. A small number identify as being Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (8 per cent), or Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander (1 per cent).^[40]

Understanding why volunteers want to have a role as a mentor is important information for The Pyjama Foundation as it helps the organisation make decisions about retention and recognition strategies. In 2023 the foundation used the *Volunteer Functions Inventory* ^[41] to assess people's motivations to volunteer with the Love of Learning program. The survey was completed by 300 volunteer mentors and the results showed that 'values' and 'understanding' were the most important motives reported by mentors. Statistical analysis of the survey results shows that 'protective' and 'career' motivations were influenced by the age of the volunteers, with younger volunteers more likely to identify these as motives for volunteering with the Love of Learning Program (Table 3).

These results show that there are different motivations for people to become a volunteer mentor, and The Pyjama Foundation is using this information to develop recruitment, recognition, and retention strategies for the Love of Learning program.

One important strategy to ensure that the volunteer mentors are feeling supported and committed is the training day provided for applicants wishing to become a mentor. This training program was observed by the QUT evaluators as being well-organised and relevant, delivered professionally by Pyjama Foundation trainers. It was observed that the training materials are informed by research, as well as by the trainer's experience. The topics covered in the training day include:

- The context of out-of-home care environments and the child protection system
- Pyjama Foundation policy and procedures
- Neuro-divergent learners
- Using resources to develop literacy and numeracy.

The training is trauma-informed and touches on all four 'R's, (overarching assumptions) of the well-documented guidelines for a trauma-informed approach.^[42] However, there is a greater focus on 'Recognising' and 'Responding' as these are most relevant to the core work of the mentor and the Love of Learning program:

1. **Realises** the widespread impact of trauma and understands potential paths for recovery.
2. **Recognises** the signs and symptoms of trauma in clients, families, staff, and others involved in the system.
3. **Responds** by fully integrating knowledge about trauma into policies, procedures, and practices.
4. **Resists** re-traumatisation.

Table 3 Mentors' motivations to volunteer

Motives	Volunteering helps to	Mean*
Values	express altruistic and humanitarian values.	6.2
Understanding	gain knowledge, skills, and abilities.	5.6
Protective	protect against things like loneliness or lack of purpose.	3.8
Career	improve career prospects.	2.4

*Respondents answered each question on a 7-point scale from 1 (not at all important) to 7 (extremely important).

“Being a Pyjama Angel has become one of the most rewarding things I’ve done with my life to date. It’s now part of my identity. I have personally gained more from this organisation than I ever thought I would.”

Pyjama Angel

The six key principles of the trauma-informed approach^[33] are also addressed in either the training or The Pyjama Foundation policies and procedures:

1. **Safety**
2. **Trustworthiness and transparency**
3. **Peer Support**
4. **Collaboration and mutuality**
5. **Empowerment, voice, and choice**
6. **Cultural, historical, and gender issues**

The training for volunteers acknowledges that executive function and self-regulation are areas affected by trauma and may also present as symptoms of attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) or autism spectrum disorder (ASD). There is a discussion around the role of the mentors and confirmation that they are not there to diagnose issues but instead focus on creating a safe and caring relationship.

The mentors are assured that if the child’s circumstances affect the visit, then they may be told more detail about the child’s background, but only where it is relevant. This is consistent with a trauma-informed approach that takes the perspective that mentors can support the child best by focusing on building the relationship in the present. This means the child can trust that they will not have to share their story if they don’t want to.

The training encourages the mentors to have fun, establish good boundaries, and encourage the child to do well at school by engaging them in educational activities such as homework, literacy, and numeracy-based games.

Relationships are a key focus in a trauma-informed response, so the relational pedagogy model is shown to the mentors and explained briefly. Relational pedagogy is a way of co-creating learning environments by developing relationships based on inclusion, shared respect, and dialogue.^[43] In addition to this explicit reference to the model, the training emphasises the importance of

building a good relationship with the child. For example, The Pyjama Foundation trainer tells mentors to “aim to complete an academic activity like reading during the visit, but if this is not working, go outside and kick the ball, or just have a chat”.

Volunteers who complete the training day are required to complete an assessment and feedback form at the end of the day, providing the foundation with information to check that the volunteer has learnt and understood the information and can provide comments about the training. This evaluation identified, as shown in the two excerpts from volunteer forms below, that volunteers give good feedback to The Pyjama Foundation about the training and clearly communicated what has helped them learn about their role and responsibilities.

In conclusion, Principle 1 focuses on the recruitment, screening, and training of committed and adaptable volunteers who effectively understand their role. This is being achieved by a comprehensive and thorough approach to recruiting and supporting motivated volunteers and training them to use a trauma informed approach and relational pedagogy.

“The training has given me more confidence to embark on my mentor journey.”

Volunteer feedback form

“The content was great, purposeful and helpful in understanding what our roles and obligations were and things we could do to assist the kids. Overall, really great, I learned a lot.”

Volunteer feedback form

Principle 2 – Thoughtful matching

Principle 2 highlights the importance of how a volunteer is matched with a child for a weekly mentoring meeting. The Pyjama Foundation put time and thought into this process as they have found that it is foundational to creating a positive mentoring relationship.

To become a program participant, children in OOHC are referred to the program by a foster carer, Child Safety Officer, foster care agency, or case worker. The person referring the child completes a referral form and states why they think the child would be a suitable participant. They provide an assessment about the child, giving basic information about the child, their level of education and support needs. Once accepted on the program the child's Love of Learning program journey begins when they are invited to become a participant.

The process between of being matched with a mentor after referral can take between 1 and 12 months. The Pyjama Foundation is extremely careful about this matching process because they believe that both the quality and length of the relationship are paramount to the child experiencing positive outcomes. This is consistent with research that found 400 undergraduate students aged 18-22 years reported that the quality of the relationship with their mentor was positively associated with self-efficacy.^[44] Other studies have also found that a quality relationship is built over time (at least 12 months) and that such a relationship has a positive impact on the program participant's academic outcomes and wellbeing.^[45, 46]

When foundation staff identify a suitable mentor to work with a child, the mentor is asked to organise the first meeting with the foster family and child. The mentor aims to build a rapport with the child and co-design a plan so that the child feels they understand the role of the mentor and able to choose activities they will do together.

When mentors have been matched with a child and are visiting them each week, The Pyjama Foundation continues to keep the mentor connected and supported. During the match there are a number of feedback opportunities that the foundation has developed and implemented to ensure there is good communication between the organisation, mentors and foster carers. This feedback also allows The Pyjama Foundation to monitor the quality of the relationship between the mentor and child, and includes:

- Surveys every three months for mentors to complete.
- Phone calls with mentors in the first and sixth months, and then bi-annually.
- Surveys and phone calls with foster carers in the third and ninth months, and then bi-annually.
- An annual survey of children annually to measure and review their feedback.

“My Pyjama Angel listens to me every week. Everything in my life is 100 per cent better because she is here for me.”

Pyjama Child

The matching process is supplemented by a range of support for the mentors:

- Mentors are provided with an online portal and a resource library, which offers a range of resources, books, puzzles, and games that mentors can borrow.
- The Pyjama Foundation has also collated a range of resources to help support and inspire meaningful and supportive conversations about culture, in particular Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture. These resources have been compiled from a range of Indigenous and Torres Strait Islander educators, artists, and authors.
- Mentors have access to a Facebook Support Group that allows them to share resources and ideas, pose questions, and ask for other support from other members of the group.

A culture of gratitude and recognition for mentors is developed in a number of ways:

- Mentors receive a handwritten card on their birthday.
- Mentors are invited to a volunteers' Christmas celebration.
- Mentors are invited to the children's Christmas party provided by The Pyjama Foundation.
- Each year events are held in each of the regions running a program (13 regions in 2023) to thank mentors, and a 'Volunteer of The Year' is awarded in each of the regions.
- The Pyjama Foundation CEO personally thanks mentors when they or the child has achieved an outcome or special milestone.
- Mentors who volunteer for 2, 5 and 10 years are recognised in a special way.
- Mentors are regularly thanked on social media, and via a monthly email.

In summary, Principle 2 focuses on thoughtfully matching a mentor with a child and then supporting the match through a range of ongoing support, monitoring, and evaluation strategies.

Congratulations to Kate Morris, our wonderful Sunshine Coast Pyjama Angel of the Year. 🌟
Kate has been the most wonderful friend and mentor to Chris, for the past 15 years.
Chris is now 23 years old and Kate still sees him for three hours every week. Kate has been such a strong advocate for Chris over the years, and has made an immeasurable impact on his life.
Kate and Chris seem more like family these days, and we are so grateful to have seen their relationship flourish.



We were so grateful to have [Craig Crawford MP](#) at our Brisbane Volunteer of the Year Awards earlier this month. It was an honour to celebrate Kim, as well as the work of other Pyjama Angels, in front of the Queensland State Minister for Child Safety and Minister for Seniors and Disability Services.
Kim has been a Pyjama Angel for 14 years and has supported four children in this time. We are grateful for your commitment Kim. Congratulations on being our Brisbane Pyjama Angel of the Year 2023!



Principle 3 – Relationship between the mentor and child

Principle 3 highlights the importance of the child experiencing a positive and caring relationship with their mentor. This is important because it is believed that positive outcomes are more likely to occur for the child when the relationship between the mentor and child is positive and consistent over time. This is confirmed in *The Handbook for Youth Mentoring*,^[47] which cites research showing that mentoring programs benefit children in a number of ways, with youth at risk having the most to benefit as such programs provide them with a positive social support network, which can foster a positive self-concept and self-esteem (p. 343). Research, including The Pyjama Foundation's own evaluations,^[48] indicates that this is most likely to occur when the relationships are meaningful, caring and consistent as children in OOHC are particularly vulnerable to rejection.^[49]

Research also suggests that a positive relationship with a mentor or teacher is fundamental to learning and that children experience a sense of self through relationships with and in relation to other people.^[50, p.1] Consistent with this finding, The Pyjama Foundation train and support mentors to use relationship pedagogy to ensure the program is developing a love of learning using a social

and relational approach. Relational pedagogy is an evidence-based approach that has been found to have positive outcomes for students and considered a practice whereby caring individuals (e.g. teachers or mentors) interact with children to build and sustain positive relationships that cognitively and emotionally support children to learn.^[50, 51]

Relational pedagogy is not only a way of delivering education; it also concerns how the educators (in this context the mentor) see themselves as learners as they interact with their child, the fosters carers, and the child-protection system. Here conversations and interactions are seen as an opportunity to learn together, share ideas, and learn about each other and the world. For this reason The Pyjama Foundation encourages mentors to think of themselves as learning in partnership with children.^[50]

In addition, adopting trauma-informed practices is one way in which The Pyjama Foundation improves a child's engagement in the program and achieves outcomes. The principles of a trauma-informed approach are important when working with children in OOHC as these

children have experienced a variety of trauma types, including emotional, neglect, physical, and sexual abuse. Trauma-informed care is a strengths-based framework that is grounded in an understanding of responsiveness to the impact of trauma, that emphasises physical, psychological and emotional safety for both providers and survivors, and that creates opportunities for survivors to rebuild a sense of control and empowerment.^[52, p.82, 53]

The Pyjama Foundation also encourages mentors to be gender-inclusive, which emphasises valuing, respecting, and acknowledging that people, including children, experience and express their gender in many different ways. Foundation staff have completed training on gender diversity and awareness, developed a training program for mentors, and established a Gender Diversity Working Group that meets quarterly. This group is assisting The Pyjama Foundation to complete and implement a policy that addresses the nuances of gender diversity and inclusivity within the organisation. One action that has already been taken is a review of The Pyjama Foundation database to allow for diverse gender pronouns and identities.

Another strategy The Pyjama Foundation use to ensure children feel safe is their commitment to creating a culturally safe environment for children from all cultural backgrounds, particularly Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures. This is important as more than 30 per cent of the children in the program come from these backgrounds. Pyjama Foundation staff complete cultural training and ask mentors to create an environment where everyone sees themselves and their culture reflected, and where it is safe to yarn, reflect, and share.

The Pyjama Foundation has implemented several actions over the years to ensure it is inclusive towards Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people. The Pyjama Foundation has set up a First Nations Advisory Body to provide independent advice on issues related to children in OOHC from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander backgrounds. The organisation has developed and is implementing a Reconciliation Action Plan, which includes offering culturally appropriate resources for mentors to utilise and a commission for an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artist to create a cultural artwork for use by the foundation. Figure 4 shows some of the artwork which was designed to depict a child's past journeys and underlying trauma, and the layers of transformation that the child experiences when a trusted mentor supports and empowers them.

The Pyjama Foundation has also engaged Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children as models for images used to promote the program, and they invite children in the program to events that celebrate NAIDOC Week, Indigenous Literacy Day, and National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children's Day. These are strategies

“Being a Pyjama Angel has become one of the most rewarding things I’ve done with my life to date. It’s now part of my identity. I have personally gained more from this organisation than I ever thought I would.”

Pyjama Angel

all work to make the program inclusive and culturally safe for children who are from culturally diverse backgrounds.

Principle 3 also aims to ensure that the program demonstrates that it is promoting the domains of The Nest, Australia's evidence-based framework for national child and youth wellbeing (0–24 years). The wellbeing domains are the following: “All young people are loved and safe, have material basics, are healthy, are learning and participating and have a positive sense of identity and culture.”^[54] By analysing the design of the Love of Learning program, this evaluation indicates that it shares the goals of The Nest: operational principles: the child at the centre; a long-term, evidence-informed approach; prevention and early intervention; privileging Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledge; a life-stage approach; and systemic change using an outcomes approach.

In summary, Principle 3 focuses on mentors using a trauma-informed approach where children are engaged in learning due to the positive and caring relationship that they develop with their mentor.

Figure 4 Pyjama Foundation artwork



Principle 4 – Individualised child-centred activities

Principle 4 highlights how the mentor engages the child to foster a love of learning once a caring and consistent relationship is formed between the mentor and the child.

Being child-centred encourages the child to play an active role in deciding what and how they will learn. This is known as ‘agency’ and helps children to develop a positive identity and resilience.^[55] Learning, however, needs to be contextualised as children in OOHC come from diverse backgrounds and situations. Therefore mentors must identify a child’s current “skills, capacities, dispositions, interests and motivations” and use these to support children to become agents in their own learning.^[56, 57]

The child-centred approach involves mentors planning and designing their activities each week to meet the individual needs and abilities of the child they are mentoring. The program prioritises the child’s voice and preferences, and mentors include the child and their foster carer in deciding the role of the mentor and how they can best support the child. This approach is supported by research and considered best practice as it gives children the right and opportunity to have a say in their own safety, health, and wellbeing.^[13, p.50] It is also aligned with The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, which states that

children have a right to be active participants in all matters affecting their lives.^[58] The approach shifts the narrative from ‘we know what the child needs and wants’ to a shared responsibility with children to co-design activities so they feel more empowered, and learn how to make positive self-determined decisions.^[59]

A child-centred approach is critical as many children in OOHC struggle with literacy and learning, including reading, and it becomes something they fear, thus creating anxiety and resistance. To reduce the anxiety, mentors are encouraged to identify play-based learning and reading aloud to the child until they feel comfortable to read for themselves. Mentors are also encouraged to use inquiry-based, interactive activities that improve literacy and academic resilience. These strategies help the child to be ‘reincluded’, a concept that “shifts the child’s identity from failure to achiever”.^[3]

To achieve positive outcomes for the child, the program prioritises supporting the child to develop a positive attitude towards reading and learning. This is important as research suggests that when a child has self-efficacy and a positive identity of themselves as a reader, they are more likely to read for pleasure and develop their literacy

Table 4 Activities that children are engaged with^[40]

	Percentage of mentors who work on these activities with the child
Literacy skills	75
Activities that build a sense of self/self-awareness	66
Life skills	60
Numeracy skills	66
Creative and critical thinking activities	58
Motor skills	53
Arts activities	45
Health and fitness	37
Social science activities	34
Cultural activities	23
STEM	22
Employment skills	8

How cool is this Watercolour Paper Pinwheel craft activity from @artbarbiog? We love the effect of watercolours, and how this can be included in an 'art party' like you can see in these photos.
Our Pyjama Angels can get the whole family involved! Always safest to get approval from Carer's to use paints first though 🙏



One of our Pyjama Angel volunteers shared this awesome maths activity with us. It's cheap, accessible and effective! Would you give this a go? 🙌
<https://www.facebook.com/themathematicsguy/posts/pfbid02SVut9HLJNBpuUmMdfueUZhnyZkbg4YW5fv9MfZSnCgpTvc54GPEKazPkLHefoJunl>



skills. Children who read for pleasure are known to do well academically, and reading aloud helps children to learn the features of diction, which includes articulation, pronunciation, delivery and vocalisation.^[26, 28, 35, 60, 61] This helps to develop the functional literacy that all children and adults need in life so they can thrive and function effectively in their community.^[62]

In the volunteer training, mentors encourage positive attitudes to reading and learning by having a safe and inclusive learning environment where children feel able to read with, or to, their mentor. The training promotes positive attitudes to learning in a diversity of contexts and making the time the mentor spends with the child a fun learning experience. This is an evidence-based approach as studies have found that in safe, respectful, and inclusive environments children are more likely to develop a positive self-concept, self-confidence, and intrinsic motivation for reading.^[35, 63]

The training also teaches the mentor about self-efficacy and developing a range of literacy skills, including language and comprehension. Mentors are encouraged to vary the pitch of their voice, use plenty of affirming language, and use conversation to develop their confidence and self-concept. The mentors are encouraged to take appropriate resources with them when meeting their child

“It is particularly rewarding to see the development of the child and see them gain confidence and enjoy things they previously found daunting. Sometimes it just takes a little bit more time explaining things on a one-to-one basis to make the learning experience easier and enjoyable.”

Pyjama Angel

and to use a variety of tools and strategies to engage the child in conversations, telling stories, and increasing their literacy fluency.

In summary, Principle 4 aims to protect children in OOHC from disadvantage by engaging them in activities that are individualised and focus on giving children empowerment, voice, and choice. The principle also includes having regular feedback mechanisms for mentors, foster carers, and children so The Pyjama Foundation can improve the child experience and evaluate the impact of having a mentor.^[64]

Conclusion

This evaluation reviewed The Pyjama Foundation's Love of Learning program and identified that it works within the child protection system to protect and promote children's wellbeing and a love of learning. The program is evidence-based as it utilises the best available evidence to manage and implement the program. The Pyjama Foundation also collects regular feedback from stakeholders, which is being used to learn about the program and train the mentors.

The program uses a distinctive approach to engage and support children. It matches a volunteer mentor with a child in OOHC for more than 12 months, and the mentor focusses on building a safe and trusting relationship with the child so they enjoy participating in reading, educational and social activities.

The features of the program that are most effective are the processes that The Pyjama Foundation uses to recruit, train, support, and retain volunteer mentors; the extensive and comprehensive assessment of those volunteers who apply to become a mentor; and the thoughtful matching process, which matches a mentor with a child for a minimum of one year. These processes are all vital for the children in OOHC who are experiencing significant change in their lives.

The program is now being assessed and evaluated to gain further evidence that it is working to provide the children in the program with a positive experience that is reducing their risk of disadvantage. An outcomes evaluation will help The Pyjama Foundation identify the significant associations between mentoring and children's academic and wellbeing outcomes.

"Our Pyjama Child has experienced so much failure but having someone come in each week to give her experiences where she can succeed is helping her build resilience and confidence. I put that down to the Pyjama Angel over the years helping her build a quiet resilience."

Foster Carer

"Big social improvement, he is a lot more confident. He opens up more easily and has taken initiative to make new friends and his Pyjama Angel has played a big part in that."

Foster Carer



Appendices

Appendix 1 *Data collected and reviewed*

Documents reviewed	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Theory of Change and Program Logic 2017• Mentor application form and process• Code of Conduct• Mentor training material, policy and procedures• Mentor retention data 2023• Board and manager report July 2023• Annual volunteer survey May 2022• Monthly survey for Pyjama Angels• Carer Evaluation Report 2021• Child Evaluation Report 2021• Monitoring and Evaluation Framework 2023• Impact Report 2022–2023• Reflect Reconciliation Action Plan 2022–2023• Risk Register
Volunteer mentors survey	A survey completed in 2023 by 300 active mentors was statistically analysed using SPSS.
Training	Two members of the evaluation team attended the volunteer training program in 2022 as observers. They analysed the training content to verify the program design and principles.
Interviews	Key informant interviews were held with six Pyjama Foundation staff working in various leadership and coordination roles across the organisation. The interviews were used to explore the program's goals, principles, processes and systems.
Focus groups	Two focus groups were held for 19 Pyjama Foundation staff and volunteers. The focus groups were used to develop the journey map, ascertain and verify the program stages and principles.

Appendix 2 *National standards for volunteer involvement.* ^[36]

Standard 1: Leadership and management	S1 states that the governing body and senior employees should lead and promote a positive culture towards volunteering and implement effective management systems to support volunteer involvement.
Standard 2: Commitment to volunteer involvement	S2 states that commitment to volunteer involvement should be set out through vision, planning and resourcing, and support the organisation's strategic direction.
Standard 3: Volunteer roles	S3 states that volunteers should be engaged in meaningful roles that contribute to the organisation's purpose, goals and objectives.
Standard 4: Recruitment and selection	S4 states that volunteer recruitment and selection strategies should be planned, consistent and meet the needs of the organisation and volunteers.
Standard 5: Support and development	S5 states that volunteers should understand their roles and gain the knowledge, skills and feedback needed to safely and effectively carry out their duties.
Standard 6: Workplace safety and wellbeing	S6 states that the health, safety and wellbeing of volunteers should be protected in the workplace.
Standard 7: Volunteer recognition	S7 states that volunteer contribution, value and impact should be understood, appreciated and acknowledged.
Standard 8: Quality management and continuous improvement	S8 states that effective volunteer involvement should result from a system of good practice, review and continuous improvement.

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