



ANCHOR

Pathways
from
Homeless

Putting Our Children at the Heart of Support

An Evaluation of Anchor's Specialist Homelessness
Children's Practitioner Pilot Program

Background

The experience of homelessness presents profound challenges for children accompanying their parents through periods of homelessness. They face a unique set of developmental and emotional hurdles that are often left unmet as they navigate the instability and potential trauma associated with homelessness. If left unaddressed, these hurdles have the potential for much longer-term impacts; evidence suggests that 50% of adults who are homeless, had their first experience of homelessness as a child.

In situations of extreme stress such as facing homelessness, parents often have reduced capacity to meet all the needs of their children, and children often don't report how they are feeling or coping in response to their situation, they just want it to be better for mum and/or dad. Support for both is needed.

While the homelessness system in Victoria rightly focuses on stabilizing housing and other supports for the primary adult family members, the specific needs of children are overlooked or diminished from a systems perspective; there are no free trauma informed supports for children accompanying their parents through episodes of homelessness.

Special thanks goes to the philanthropic organisations Perpetual Trustees, Yarra Ranges Council, and the Community Enterprise Foundation, who had the vision to enable this important piece of work which contributes to our understanding of the needs of vulnerable children in Victoria's homelessness system.

Why was this project needed?

As the State Governments entry point for families experiencing homelessness in the Yarra Ranges our data showed a significant number of children, 119 in 2022, who were accompanying their parents in the homelessness system. Understanding the longer-term detrimental impacts homelessness can have on a child, and with no dedicated resources available to work with children in this situation, we saw this as an opportunity to pilot a new approach within the current service system.

The Effects of Homelessness on Children

Impact on Education Attainment

Children experiencing homelessness exhibit low attendance rates due to the inherent instability of their living situations, the frequency of necessary moves, and a lack of reliable access to transportation. Stress and trauma associated with the experience of Homelessness also impact academic performance. Access to school supplies also present significant barriers and further financial stress.

Impact on Social Networks and Social Isolation

Increased social isolation, difficulty in forming and maintaining meaningful connections, and constant changes in living conditions lead to long lasting mental health issues, including the on-going ability to form healthy relationships.

Self Esteem and Mental Health Issues

Homeless children experience heightened risk of depression, anxiety, and other mental health problems, with pervasive stress, trauma, and instability inherent in living without a stable home adversely affecting emotional well-being, leading to feelings of low self-worth, hopelessness, and despair.

Intergenerational Homelessness

Research strongly suggests that childhood experiences of homelessness are a strong predictor of homelessness in adulthood, with one particular study finding that a substantial percentage of individuals who experienced homelessness as children went on to experience homelessness as adults. Yet another research indicates that a significant proportion of homeless children had parents who had also experienced homelessness, highlighting the cyclical nature of the complex issue.

Other Detriments Experienced by Homeless Children

Physical health implications are substantial due to inadequate living conditions, limited access to healthcare services, and increased exposure to environmental hazards. Risks such as sleep deprivation, potential exposure to substance abuse within their environment, and an increased vulnerability to physical and sexual abuse are also significant concerns.

As a child focused and child safe organisation, we were determined to test whether a new approach could contribute to immediate better outcomes and but to ultimately stem the intergenerational impacts of homelessness.

Anchor's Solution:

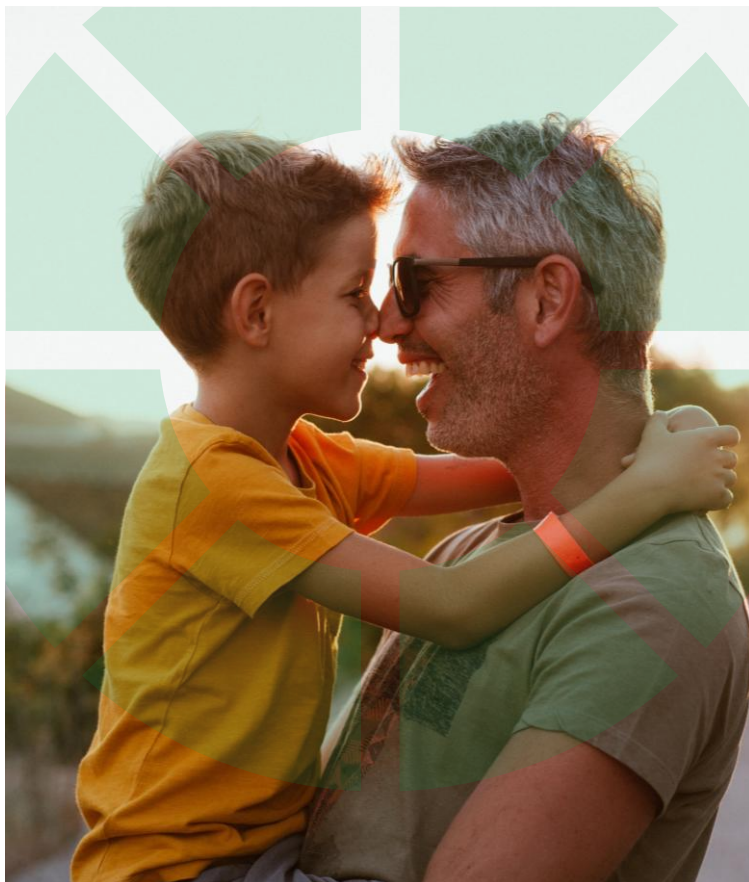
A Simple, Powerful Formula

$$\text{Connection} + \text{Care} = \text{Growth}$$

Anchor hypothesized that direct trauma informed therapeutic support for children in the homelessness system, would help improve a child's engagement with school, connection to social networks and their overall well-being.

Anchor's Specialist Homelessness Children's Practitioner Pilot (internally referred to as "Meet Leanne") was designed to build resilience, restore confidence, continuity in education, and give children a chance to thrive — not just survive whilst in the homelessness system.

The pilot program embedded a specialist child-focused therapeutic practitioner within Anchor's homelessness crisis response team with the aim of providing targeted, trauma-informed support for children within the homelessness system. This approach aligns with the concerns raised by the Inquiry into Homelessness in Victoria (Parliament of Victoria, 2021), which specifically highlighted the deficiency of government-funded, free, and accessible services offering specialised trauma-focused assessment, planning, and individualised support for homeless children within the Eastern Region.



The pilot focused on two key areas:

Engaging Parents: Research strongly indicates that children whose parents are actively and meaningfully engaged in their support services are more likely to experience positive outcomes, such as improvements in their mental health and social connections. Maintaining positive parent-child relationships is a protective buffer against the negative consequences of homelessness on children's social and emotional well-being.

Empowering Children: By providing individualised trauma informed and therapeutic support pathways, active support is critical in developing resilience, adaptability, and a strong sense of agency that will enable children to thrive above their challenges to build academic continuity and progress, develop essential social skills, and successfully meet crucial education milestones.

Evaluation Methodology and Timeframe

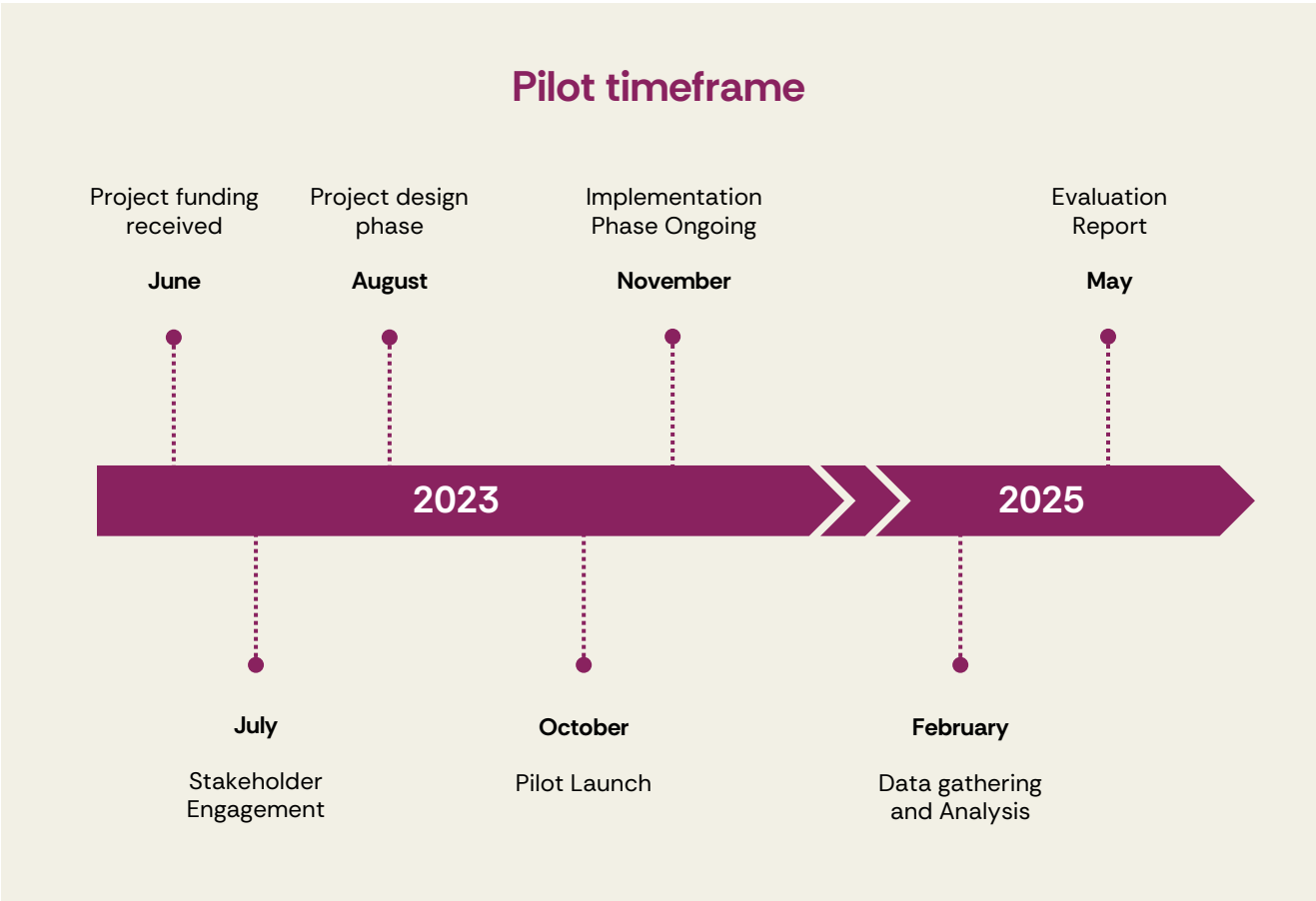
The evaluation methodology combined quantitative data, collected through baseline and endline assessments, with rich qualitative data gathered from the practitioners’ observations and conversations with clients.

Data was collected using three primary instruments:

Child (client) Survey – Age appropriate aimed to assess their perceptions of their well-being, their experiences with the program, their sense of safety and support, and any changes they may have experienced in their emotional state, social connections, and engagement with school.

Parent Survey – aimed to gather their perspectives on the program’s impact on their children, any changes they have observed in their children’s behaviour or emotional well-being, and their own experiences of support and empowerment through the program. The survey also explored changes in their ability and confidence to support their child’s development.

Therapist Assessment – The therapist assessments drew upon professional observations and clinical judgment to evaluate the child’s progress in areas such as emotional regulation, resilience, social skills, and overall well-being. An inhouse rubric was created to standardise the practitioner’s assessment, which also tracked any specific developmental goals identified for each child and their progress towards achieving them.



Evaluation Findings

Feedback about the program was overwhelmingly positive from both clients and their parents, highlighting its clarity, relevance, benefits and overall satisfaction with the intervention. The Meet Leanne project demonstrated considerable success in providing targeted, therapeutic support to children experiencing homelessness in the Yarra Ranges.

Key findings from children (clients)

The project measured seven discrete constructs in line with the projects Theory of Change. The evaluation showed a **24% average improvement** across all developmental constructs with the most significant gains in:



Resiliency (+30%)



Goal Setting (+28%)

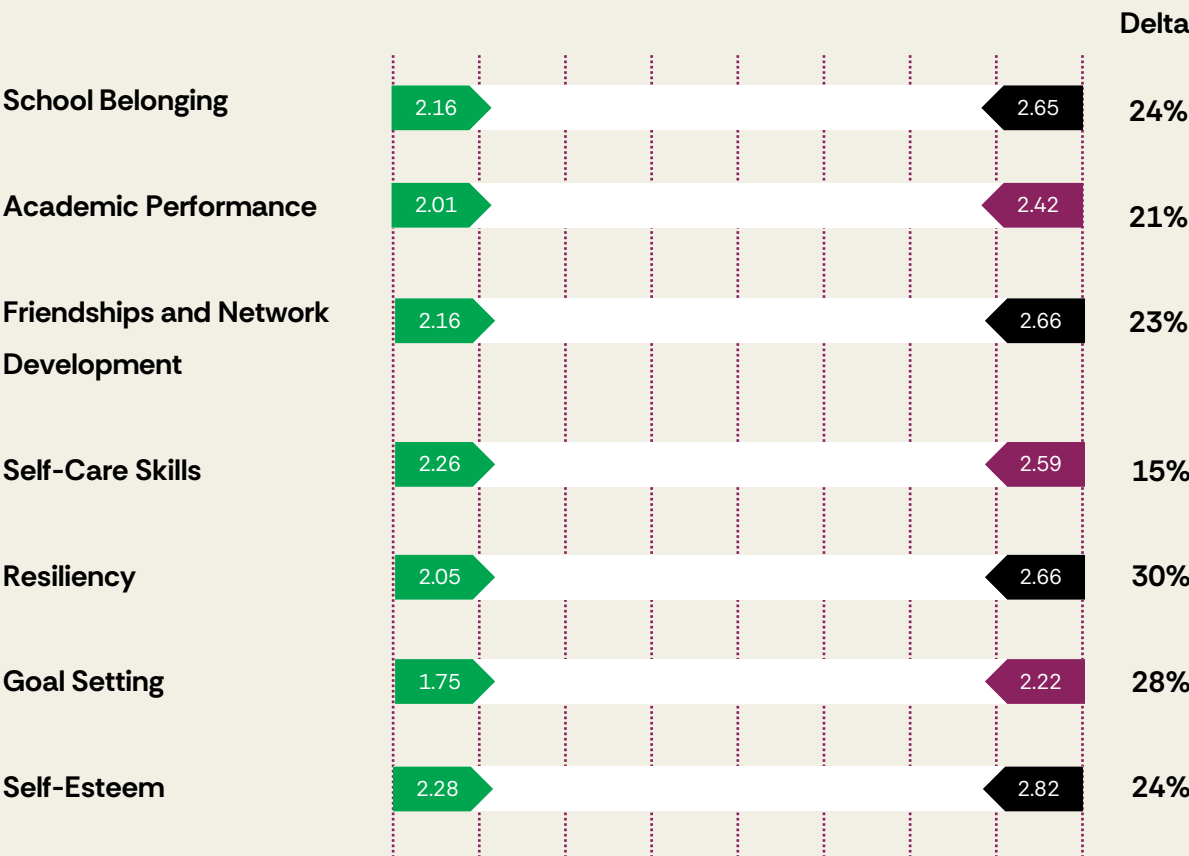


Self-Esteem (+24%)



School Belonging (+24%)

Self-Care Skills showed the smallest improvement (+15%), indicating ongoing challenges in establishing healthy routines.



Key finding from parents

Parents expressed overwhelmingly positive feedback about the project, particularly regarding the clarity and usefulness of communication, purpose, benefits, and structure, indicating that materials were well-structured, accessible, and directly addressed their needs and concerns.

This strong alignment between what was communicated and what parents needed to know contributed to their high level of understanding and engagement.

In relation to their child, parents perceived the program as having made a holistic positive impact on their children's lives, improving not only academic performance but also enriching social connections, emotional resilience, essential personal development skills like goal-setting and self-care practices, alongside fostering an improved sense of belonging within school environments.



94%

say their child is more confident



91%

say their child is setting goals



100%

say they now feel supported in their parenting

Key Insights by Construct



School Belonging: Improved through supportive school transitions and inclusive environments, though mental health and attendance issues still posed barriers.



Academic Performance: Gains were made despite persistent challenges like health and home instability, with school support playing a crucial role.



Friendships & Networks: Children developed stronger social skills and friendships, especially through community programs, though some still faced isolation.



Self-Care: Progress was noted in routines and awareness, but issues like sleep hygiene and eating disorders remained.




Resiliency: Marked growth in coping and problem-solving, though some children continued to feel overwhelmed.



Goal Setting: Children began articulating and working toward goals, despite systemic barriers like visa issues and unstable housing.



Self-Esteem: Confidence and self-advocacy improved, especially with better living conditions and emotional support.



Summary of Changes

The combined qualitative and quantitative analysis demonstrates a marked improvement in school belonging across most criteria. Clients experienced enhanced emotional well-being and inclusivity at school, which likely contributed to greater participation in activities and stronger peer relationships.

However, challenges such as inconsistent attendance due to family circumstances and limited academic engagement persist for some clients. These findings underscore the importance of holistic interventions that address both individual and systemic barriers.

Conclusion

Overall, the pilot proved to be a valuable intervention demonstrating significant success in fostering emotional well-being, resilience, and key life skills in children experiencing homelessness. To sustain these positive outcomes and address persistent challenges, future efforts should focus on strengthening parental capacity, supporting the development of broader social networks, providing practical tools for habit-building, and ensuring continuity of support through effective transitions and addressing systemic barriers.

The full evaluation report is available upon request.

Contact Avi MacMull, Quality and Evaluation Manager at avi.macmull@anchor.org.au to request a copy.



Making a Difference: One Skatepark, One Milkshake, One Conversation At a Time

For more information on how you can support Anchor and invest in the future of our most vulnerable young people, please contact:

Heidi Tucker

CEO, Anchor

E: Heidi.tucker@anchor.org.au

Anchor Community Care Ltd
44 Lakeview Drive

ANCHOR

Pathways
from
Homeless