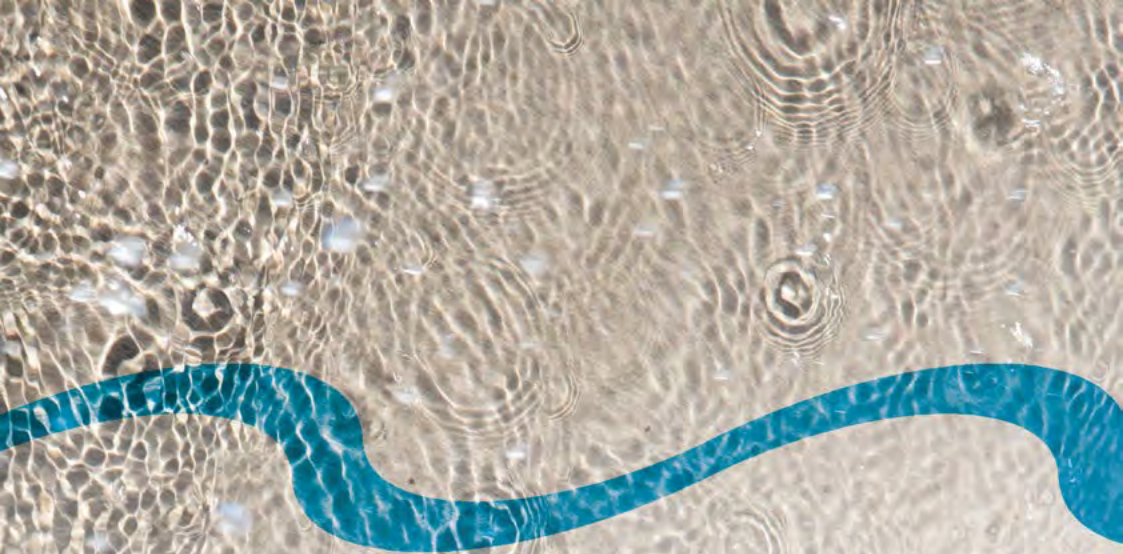


THE IMPACT OF COTTAGE BY THE SEA

FROM RIPPLES TO WAVES

Report, July 2024

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The Impact of Cottage by the Sea: From Ripples to Waves is a research report prepared by Deakin University for Cottage by the Sea.

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THE IMPACT OF COTTAGE BY THE SEA

FROM RIPPLES TO WAVES



Even the smallest of ripples can lead to riding life's larger waves

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In 2023, Cottage by the Sea invited Deakin University to conduct further research following on from the report *Cottage by the Sea: The Difference 'Take a Break' Makes* (Paatsch et al., 2023) that presented the short-term impacts of the *Take a Break* program. This new research project built on the previous report's recommendations and findings and focused on evidencing the medium- to long-term impacts of Cottage by the Sea programs from the perspective of the alumni and parents of children and young people who attended *Take a Break*, *REEF*, and *Mentor* programs, as well an ex-principal, an ex-Cottage by the Sea board member, a director of a charitable foundation, teachers, and leadership from schools who had attended the *Take a Break* program for many years. In addition, views were also sought from students and their teachers and school leaders who had recently participated in the *Take a Break* program for the first time.

The definition of impact is discussed more fully in the introduction to this report. What should be highlighted at the outset is the fact that Cottage by the Sea has a long history, stretching back to 1890, and it could only have continued to exist over this time due to the remarkable staff and level of community support it receives. This alone is a testament to its long-term, enduring impact. Cottage by the Sea inspires the generosity of the leadership and staff who plan and implement its programs, as well as those who donate their time and money to ensure that Cottage by the Sea meets its vision of providing high-quality programs to children and young people across the state of Victoria who are often living with high levels of disadvantage, trauma, and experiences of natural disasters such as bushfires and floods.

Participants in this research project were interviewed either in small groups or individually. Responses from these interviews produced the rich store of data that forms the bulk of the content of this report. Other archival materials made available to the research team have also been incorporated into the report, providing insights into the historical impact of Cottage by the Sea.

SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS

This summary of key findings draws from the various data sources to synthesise key insights into the medium- to long-term impacts of Cottage by the Sea on the lives of children and young people who attend their programs. Specifically, these insights are gathered from alumni spanning the years 1939 to 2023, an ex-principal, leaders, an ex-board member, as well as parents, principals, teachers, and students. These findings are presented in response to the following two research questions:

1. *What are the medium- to long-term impacts of Cottage by the Sea programs on children, young people, families, schools, and communities?*
2. *In what ways does participation in Cottage by the Sea programs enhance the lives of children and young people who attend?*

Findings from the analysis of these data identified **four broad themes** in relation to the medium- to long-term impacts and opportunities offered by Cottage by the Sea: (1) Fostering Fun and Enjoyment; (2) Building Relationships; (3) Providing a Safe Haven; and (4) (Re)Creating Happy Memories. These themes are discussed in the report that follows.

1. FOSTERING FUN AND ENJOYMENT

Cottage by the Sea provides participants with opportunities to experience fun and enjoyment in every aspect of their programs. Fun is centrally positioned as an organisational core aim of its mission. Fun and enjoyment provide opportunities to relieve stress and to increase wellbeing, and is linked to higher academic achievement in school tasks. Findings from our research show that Cottage by the Sea provided fun and enjoyment for all the participants, which brought about greater engagement and supported students to be ready to learn, interact more with their peers, and become more resilient across the ups and downs of life. Positive outcomes were reported for the children and young people themselves, their peers, their teachers and parents, and communities more generally. In particular, the participants believe that the Cottage gave them the chance to have fun and to enjoy themselves, and this was among the best part of the program. Cottage by the Sea excels in providing an environment where children and young people can have fun, enjoy themselves, and thrive.

2. BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS

Building relationships is core to the everyday practices at Cottage by the Sea. These practices include the deep relationships the organisation has with those who contribute to its ongoing success, including those who make financial contributions to sustaining its properties and programs, and those who donate their time and effort in making the gifts the children receive with such great joy. A major characteristic of Cottage by the Sea programs is to encourage participants to display respect, which is achieved by creating an environment that expects respectful behaviour and interactions between children and staff, but also by showing deep levels of respect for, and acceptance of, the children and young people themselves. This respect is shown to the children from their very first interactions with Cottage by the Sea staff. They are encouraged to feel they belong to the Cottage by the Sea community, and this feeling of belonging makes it easier for the children and young people to then engage in respectful interactions with Cottage by the Sea staff, their own teachers, and their peers.

3. PROVIDING A SAFE HAVEN

A significant number of participants who attended Cottage by the Sea programs have lived experiences of trauma. This trauma may be attributed to family environments, experiences of war and of being refugees, and of living through natural disasters, including bushfires and floods. Cottage by the Sea provides these children and young people with a non-judgemental environment where they can experience trust while being nurtured to develop their own sense of trusting relationships with Cottage by the Sea staff, their teachers, and their peers. Such an environment works to disrupt life-course trajectories by reframing pathways and aspirations. Cottage by the Sea achieves this by creating safe interactional environments, respecting the very different needs of all children and young people who take part in its programs and providing support based on their individual needs.

4. (RE)CREATING HAPPY MEMORIES

The differences between the life children and young people experience at Cottage by the Sea and their everyday life can be stark. Cottage by the Sea works hard to create a memorable experience for everyone attending their programs, not only by providing fun and challenging activities but also in the mementoes given to the children and young people made by members of the community, such as clothing and handmade toys. These artefacts become ongoing symbols of their time in the program, with parents and children and young people alike often mentioning how treasured these items are. Our research showed the ongoing sense of connection to Cottage by the Sea these mementoes enabled, and the effect these artefacts – such as 'the cupboard', 'the slide', 'the garden', and 'the beach' – had in reinforcing their sense of being welcomed, of belonging, and of the support they felt during their time in the program and beyond.

Any report seeking to analyse the impact/s of organisations such as Cottage by the Sea needs to identify and separate out themes to help make sense of what would otherwise be too complex to understand. However, what Cottage by the Sea does so well is to integrate these themes into an overall, coherent, and consistent experience for the participating children and young people. Time and again, those interviewed found it hard to point to a single aspect of the program that they felt left a major impact on their experience. Instead, the impact could only be understood once all aspects of the program were seen as working together, displaying the nature, breadth, and scope of the opportunities provided to those participating. It was these aspects that turned the ripple effects of Cottage by the Sea into the waves that often carried these children and young people through their lives.







RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings from this research provide compelling evidence of the medium- to long-term impact of Cottage by the Sea on the lives of the children and young people who attend, and the opportunities the organisation's programs provide. For those who attended Cottage by the Sea between 1939 and 2010, their reflections showed the ways in which their experiences at the Cottage changed their lives and led them to pathways they could never have imagined. For the young people who had attended the *Take a Break* program more recently, their experiences reflected the joy of trying and achieving new things, building resilience, and applying their newly found abilities to other contexts at school and at home.

The following **four overall recommendations** seek to help strengthen and expand the important and enduring work of Cottage by the Sea.

RECOMMENDATION 1

That Cottage by the Sea continues its focus on strengthening community, not only as the basis of providing excellence in adventure-based youth programs, but in how its staff, volunteers, donors, and the broader community understand and engage in this role.

One of the strongest findings from our report is that the strength of Cottage by the Sea is drawn from the strong connections the organisation has with its community, particularly the volunteers who donate so much of their time and effort to providing resources for those who attend. The thread of community runs through everything Cottage by the Sea does, and by example, this strengthens the bonds between the participants, their schools, their families, and local communities.

A repeated theme from our interviews with all participant groups was how welcomed the children were into the programs and how much joy they experienced throughout the varied activities provided. Such an impact is attributed to the ways in which many members of the Cottage by the Sea community contributed to making the time children and young people spent at these programs memorable and life changing.

RECOMMENDATION 2

That Cottage by the Sea provides younger children with authentic and fun opportunities.

The early years of a child's life are critical for brain development, language learning, play, and social-emotional wellbeing. Research has shown that many children are denied these rich experiences that support their development during these early years. Interventions during the crucial first six years of life are likely to have a strong and lasting impact on children's future development. Expanding Cottage by the Sea programs to encompass these years could have an even greater impact.

If there is scope to expand the work of Cottage by the Sea, early intervention involving rich authentic experiences might have the greatest impact if it were extended to providing a program directed towards children younger than those who currently attend.

RECOMMENDATION 3

That Cottage by the Sea expands its reach in a time of increasing community need during a cost-of-living crisis. This will involve the need for increased funding support facilitated by efforts to market the purposes and impacts of the programs to funding bodies.

We live in difficult times. Many people are struggling today with the costs of food, housing, education, and other necessities of life increasing at a time of heightened inflation diminishing the buying power of their wages, if they are lucky enough to have wages. These constraints are known to impact the emotional and family life stresses people living with vulnerability face. Many migrants to Australia come from nations where trauma is a constant part of their lives. Climate change and extreme weather events are placing larger numbers of Australians in danger of floods, bushfires, and droughts. The needs of those facing disadvantage seem to be growing year on year.

This report highlights the importance of Cottage by the Sea to sustain its programs and to continue to seek ongoing financial support from the many generous donors. As the work of Cottage by the Sea continues to expand due to the increase in demand, there is a need to ensure that there are long-term plans to seek donations and other funding sources necessary to broaden the reach of the organisation.

RECOMMENDATION 4

That Cottage by the Sea creates processes to enable past participants to communicate their views of the ongoing impacts the programs have had on their lives.

This research has highlighted the complexity of gaining access to data in a systematic way that allows Cottage by the Sea to understand the medium- to long-term impacts of its programs. Past participants move on with their lives and are often not easy to contact, and while the work of Cottage is understood to have had a dramatic impact on these past participants, it is not clear how they might communicate this to the Cottage itself. There is a need for Cottage by the Sea to consider ways to gather ongoing longitudinal data from past participants to better understand this ongoing impact of the opportunities the programs provide.

This data collection might include ongoing interviews with alumni across the different years to track longitudinal impact. Participating schools could be invited to assist in recruiting a broad range of alumni across the years and across geographical areas of Victoria. In addition, views from the community, including donors and volunteers, could also be sought to understand the medium- to long-term impact of Cottage by the Sea. Participants could be asked which aspects of the programs they felt had the greatest ongoing impact, the nature of that impact, and the aspects of the program they believe could be improved to increase this impact.



INTRODUCTION: THE RIPPLE EFFECT

This report describes the analysis of the findings of the research conducted on behalf of Cottage by the Sea by Deakin University, which explored the medium- to long-term impacts of the Cottage by the Sea, both for recent participants who attended the *Take a Break* program and on longstanding alumni who attended *Take a Break*, *REEF*, and *Mentor* programs at Cottage by the Sea.

Specifically, the two research questions driving this report were:

1. *What are the medium- to long-term impacts of Cottage by the Sea programs on children, young people, families, schools, and communities?*
2. *In what ways does participation in Cottage by the Sea programs enhance the lives of children and young people who attend?*

This report should be considered in relation to the 2023 report by Deakin University *Cottage by the Sea: The Difference 'Take a Break' Makes* (Paatsch et al., 2023), which investigated the immediate, short-term impact of the *Take a Break* program on participants. Findings showed that the opportunities offered by the *Take a Break* program build participant confidence, their sense of belonging, self-belief, and caring dispositions, while also developing a healthy mindset with a better attitude towards nutrition and physical activity.

While these immediate impacts were strong, the question remained around how much of an impact participation in the *Take a Break* program might have over the medium to long term. In our previous study, the research team placed a strong preference on listening to the voices of the children who had recently participated in the *Take a Break* program. However, we also recognised that these experiences might have been too recent and that the children might have been too young to have had time to reflect on any longer term impacts, particularly in terms of attitudes and preparedness to engage with any other challenging tasks they might face in the future. For this reason, the current research study interviewed alumni of Cottage by the Sea who attended the *Take a Break* program, as well as some participants who attended the REEF and *Mentor* programs, one of whom participated in programs as far back as the late 1930s. We also interviewed principals and teachers who had been attending Cottage by the Sea for many years. The inclusion of school staff with longstanding and recurrent experiences with Cottage by the Sea provided an important and unique perspective in considering the diversity of ways that longer term impact has been experienced by past participants.

One of the major challenges in seeking to assess the impact of programs such as those offered at Cottage by the Sea is that what impacts and how you measure them says as much about those doing the evaluation as it does about the program. This is particularly salient in not-for-profit organisations seeking to address a broad range of changes, including those related to opportunities for people living with vulnerability, the personal health and wellbeing of the children and young people attending their programs, developing a community based on respect, providing children and young people with an adventure program that is both fun and inspirational, and providing young people with a glimpse of what they are capable of achieving if they are prepared to have a go. Simple measures for such program objectives are challenging to ascertain. However, this does not mean that the evaluation of programs like those

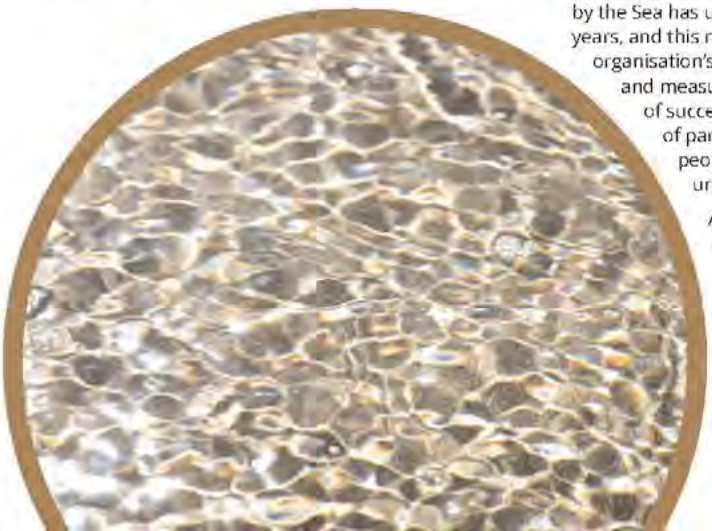
provided at Cottage by the Sea is impossible, merely that the evidence for impact needs to be as nuanced and diverse as the opportunities provided by the program itself (Kelly, 2021). As one principal from a school that has attended the *Take a Break* program over several years noted in her interview:

> the positive impact that Cottage by the Sea will have on kids while they're there, but also in the future, is undeniable ... they learn about themselves and they learn about each other ... yeah, you can't put that into a statistic.

Similarly, one of Cottage's alumni who participated in the *Take a Break* program as an eight-year-old child over 20 years ago, who had experienced 'a rough upbringing' and where she had 'been put here so mum can sort herself out', commented:

> The impact, even if some people don't see it as a big impact, even just the smallest of things, can really change a child's life.

This report provides more than a simple view of the impact of the programs of Cottage by the Sea. It understands that impact needs to be understood in multiple ways according to the life worlds of those who live the experience. Impact is also likely to change over time as participants mature and as they are provided with opportunities to reflect on the meanings that eventually cluster around their experience; that is, as **ripples become waves** rolling down the years of their lives.



Cottage by the Sea sits within a tradition of philanthropic organisations committed to allowing children to be children. Organisations that see their role in providing children and young people with opportunities to experience the fun, challenge, adventure, and sheer joy of being a child. Such organisations have a history that is distinct from the history of schools, and this is part of the reason why educators hold these organisations in such high regard. Schools were born out of multiple competing needs, many of which proved to be essentially economic (Campbell & Proctor, 2014). Schools have a history of focusing on what children and young people can become within the strict confines of a mandated curriculum. However, educators have long understood the benefits of allowing children and young people the opportunity to discover knowledge for themselves and about themselves within structured but engaging and challenging environments based on fun (Cunningham, 2021; Rousseau, 1979).

The vision of supporting children and young people to become the best version of themselves by providing them with opportunities to both see the current limitations they may have been imposing on themselves and to transcend those limitations through encouragement, self-belief, and support is central to how Cottage by the Sea structures its programs. The Cottage provides a safe environment that is non-judgemental of either the children and young people themselves or the communities they belong to. Rather, children and young people are welcomed with unconditional positive regard into programs committed to deeply respecting them as children and young people. This is how Cottage by the Sea has understood its role for over 100 years, and this needs to form the basis on which the organisation's impact is understood, assessed, and measured. Simple, quantifiable measures of success, such as length of stay or number of participating children and young people, are inadequate when seeking to understand these deeper impacts.

As such, this report focuses heavily on the affective and emotional responses of participants, their families, and their teachers. These responses are often overlooked in research; they are difficult to capture and almost impossible

to measure directly. However, understanding these impacts has been central to how we have conducted this research, since these are the impacts that the Cottage by the Sea programs are focused on – to ignore these is to miss the point of the reason why Cottage by the Sea exists in the first place. We have provided more than just a moment in time assessment of the impact of Cottage by the Sea. Instead, we have sought to be aware of the history of the organisation, both in its impacts on participants and the depth of feeling held for it within the community, its staff, volunteers, and those who donate or support its work. This is the backdrop that makes its impact possible. The history of Cottage by the Sea is also the story of past participants. Their stories provide remarkable insights into the impact of the Cottage, showing that even the briefest moments of engagement can make a significant impact on children and young people who are often faced with deeply challenging life experiences.

Our nuanced and diverse understandings of the medium- to long-term impact of Cottage by the Sea is reflected in the **four themes** that structured our analysis of our data and that will be presented in detail in the sections that follow. These four themes are:

1. Fostering Fun and Engagement
2. Building Relationships
3. Providing a Safe Haven
4. (Re)Creating Memories

One of the major findings of this report is that the programs provided by Cottage by the Sea are very difficult to evaluate by simply asking current participants about their experiences. This is not due to how young many of these participants are, although many of the real impacts of the programs require levels of reflection that are unavailable to such young participants, often until many years have passed. A repeated theme in our research has been that children and young people began by understanding Cottage by the Sea as providing them with the opportunity to have fun in a holiday environment that would otherwise be unavailable to them. But later in life, on reflection, they also saw that their experiences at Cottage by the Sea, including the otherwise seemingly innocuous – such as being provided healthy food, clean clothing, comfortable bedding and healthy outdoor activities – all added to a sense of opportunity for how they could live their lives and the options available to them that might have not otherwise seemed possible.

As one alumni who attended Cottage by the Sea in the 1960s commented in her interview:

> *Having clean clothes and having a bath every day and having three meals a day. That was all new to me ... it made me want that for my life more so than ever before ... it made me strive even more to get away from the environment that I was living in and make my own environment, and I firmly believe that Cottage did that.*



Cottage by the Sea achieves its aims, mission, and values by providing young people with programs that are fundamentally based on respect. Those attending the programs are not reminded of the disadvantages they live with – whether these are economic, environmental or due to a background in trauma – but are constantly shown how to participate in challenging activities that test the limits of their own skills and levels of self-belief. It is this new awareness of their own potential that is likely to have the largest medium- to long-term impacts – while also proving to be the hardest to assess.

In this sense, the researchers see the impact of the Cottage by the Sea programs and the underlying philosophy of the Cottage as being less concerned with notions of care – that is, in seeking to provide a brief respite for children and their families as an act of charity as was the case the early

mission of the organisation– but rather as an act of responsibility and of practising what it means to belong in a community deeply interested in providing experiences and opportunities that show what can be done together (Taylor, 2018). Here the participants are reminded of the support that has gone into making this experience exceptional. These include the quality of the facilities, the staff, location, activities, food, and the generosity of those who spent time handmaking toys and providing clothing and toiletries. The sense that Cottage by the Sea provides an opportunity for the whole of the community to come together to support these children and young people was repeatedly noted by all those interviewed, not least the children and young people themselves.



This report provides multiple perspectives on the impacts Cottage by the Sea programs offer children and young people. The voices of the children and young people themselves often focused on the concrete aspects of the programs: the food they ate, the activities they engaged in, the beach, and the joy of being able to wake up in a room filled with their fellow students. Parents often noticed other changes in their children on returning home, including being more community-minded and more prepared to help out at home. Teachers and principals noted the pedagogical aspects of the program and how well the staff at Cottage by the Sea seamlessly integrate best practices in showing respect for children and young people while differentiating the challenges each child faced. But perhaps the most moving parts of this report belong to the alumni who reflect on how Cottage by the Sea changed their lives. These experiences, often a lifetime ago, have remained vivid for them, providing a sense of hope and resilience.

The most recent children attending Cottage by the Sea often say they already know their time at the Cottage will prove to be one of the most cherished memories of their school years. Such impacts are the focus of the remainder of this report.





THIS RESEARCH

This report is the culmination of research conducted by a team from Deakin University to understand the medium- to long-term impacts of Cottage by the Sea programs on a wide range of participant groups, including alumni (both recent and those who attended between 1939 and the 2010s), parents, teachers and principals, leadership, an ex-principal, a director of a charitable foundation, and an ex-board member. It follows on from a report into the immediate, short-term impact of Cottage by the Sea program, *Cottage by the Sea: The Difference 'Take a Break' Makes* (Paatsch et al., 2023). The previous study explored the ways in which participation and opportunities provided in this program support children to be active, healthy, confident, and respectful. The current study aimed to build from the recommendations highlighted in the previous study to explore the following two research questions:

1. *What are the medium- to long-term impacts of Cottage by the Sea programs on children, young people, families, schools, and communities?*
2. *In what ways does participation in Cottage by the Sea programs enhance the lives of children and young people who attend?*

The question of the impact of programs such as those conducted by Cottage by the Sea is inherently difficult to assess. In the short term, the impact might be great and relatively easy to assess. However, assessing the medium- to long-term impacts is more challenging since it means having ongoing contact with people who might only have had a very short relationship with Cottage by the Sea. In this report, we have defined medium-term impacts as those associated with schools and their students and parents in the last two years. Long-term impacts are those reported by alumni, teachers, principals, parents, an ex-principal, and an ex-board member beyond this timeframe.

The study employed a qualitative case study to investigate complex phenomena within their real-life contexts using multiple sources of evidence (Nair et al., 2023; Yin, 2018). After securing an extension of our ethical clearance from Deakin University (HREC Number: 2021-043) and the Victorian Department of Education's Research in Schools and Early Childhood Settings permission (Application ID: 23-07-069), the research team interviewed four groups of participants:

1. Alumni who attended Cottage by the Sea programs from 1939 as well as an ex-principal, ex-board member, and a director of a charitable foundation.
2. Principals and teachers who have attended Cottage by the Sea programs over the past 10 years.
3. Student attendees who attended Cottage by the Sea in 2022 and 2023.
4. Parents of past attendees.

Cottage by the Sea recruited all participants (including school staff and students). The schools then assisted in recruiting teachers, students, and parents to take part in the research.



PARTICIPANTS

The four participant groups that were interviewed are presented below in two main sections: alumni and schools.

ALUMNI

The alumni who participated in this research included those who had attended Cottage by the Sea between 1939 to the 2010s, an ex-principal, an ex-board member, a director of a charitable foundation, and a parent of a student who had attended over 10 years ago.

The 10 participants who had attended Cottage by the Sea were:

- **A gentleman who attended the Cottage as an eight-year-old in 1939.** He remembered:

> In 1939, Friday, late Friday, January, about then, 1939 a bushfire ripped across eastern Victoria and killed about 60 people ... and burnt down our school and burnt down all the houses in the district ... and someone decided it would be a good thing if we had a holiday with Cottage by the Sea. Cottage by the Sea was a major event for us kids from the country ... I just turned 8 ... and I was either unfortunate or something because I got pneumonia, I think the first week ... I remember things like getting Nestle chocolate. Someone would bring in a bar of Nestle chocolate in sick bay ... it was a whole widening of my experience ... it was a very, very big experience.

- A woman who attended Cottage by the Sea **as a 10-year-old in the 1960s and whose mother had also gone to the Cottage.** She remembered:

> I lived in [suburb], which was a slum at the time, and it was really, really rough and my home life was horrific ... I had been running away [from home] for probably a year or two before I even went to the Cottage ... police would know where to find me and bring me back ... so my girlfriend's mum told me: 'put as many clothes as you can and your coat on and meet me tomorrow morning'. So I did and she took me to [another state] when I was two weeks short of my 14th birthday ... I was 14 when I left home for the last time ... Cottage showed me that there is another way for people to live and made me realise that I wanted to live like that, not the way I was living at home.

- **A female who attended Cottage by the Sea as a 7-year-old in the early 2000s.** She remembered:

> We've [she and her sisters] come from a rough upbringing. We've been put here so mum can sort herself out ... when you're a kid you just think it's a really cool camp ... I remember thinking it was safe and fun from start to finish ... two-week fun house ... it gives you hope, as a child, who would have thought I'd go to two Olympics, two Comm games, three world champs off what we'd gone through as children ... taking out of a negative environment and showing you a positive one. And that's kind of the way it [Cottage by the Sea] helped shape my life.



- A female who attended Cottage by the Sea **in grade 3 or 4 from a low socio-economic school in the early 2010s and attended *Take a Break*, *REEF*, and *Mentor* programs.** She remembered:

> I came to *Take a Break* in grade 3 or 4 ... I did two years of *REEF* ... [it] really helped that transition into high school ... then year 8 to 12 was the *Mentor* program ... I started uni ... and then I saw that Cottage was hiring, so put in my resume, and I've been working here ever since ... I've just finished paramedicine and nursing ... I do love this [Cottage by the Sea], like I love it with my whole heart.
>
> You could never put a money-based value on it [Cottage by the Sea] ... you couldn't realistically get statistics on the impact ... during the time I don't think I realised its worth. It was more so I had experiences to brag about ... but I think it just gave me so much depth as a person ... it made me such a more talkative person, an open person and someone that has life experience that's coupled with life values ... it enabled me to be a better leader, better talker, better critical thinker ... there's a long-term connection.

- **A female who attended Cottage by the Sea in grade 5/6 in the early 2010s and attended *REEF* and *Mentor* programs.** She remembered:

> I started off in the *REEF* program, which was very exciting. I didn't know much about it, just sort of camps every school holidays. [It was] exciting coming here doing so many things you wouldn't normally do. When I graduated from *Mentor* program it was heartbreaking never to come again to another camp ... and I remember crying ... Cottage has been such a big part of my life. When I think of my childhood, I think of Cottage, because it's where I spent all my time. I was very fortunate that I was given a scholarship to do my pilots license ... all those things that set you up for life. And you know that's so fortunate at such a young age to have Cottage and everyone back you up with what you want to do ... I think it's just a really good camp that changes kids' lives ... it's changed my life.

- A **parent whose son attended** Cottage by the Sea **in grade 3** and is now 22 years old. She remembered:

> Cottage approached the school for him to do the *REEF* program ... they came to our school because it's a low socio-economic area ... I remember he was really excited that they got to go to Cottage ... it was a good time for him, especially because of our family situation ... it was something that was his and wasn't anything to do with anything else that was going on in our family. He did the bridge climb which he loved and they camped ... and he got some money to put towards some basketball shoes from the Cottage ... He got part of a scholarship which helped him go to Nepal. I remember the relationships that he formed with the staff and the older boys. He always had a great time ... it came at the perfect time for him, in our family life ... he was always happy ... it assisted with his confidence as well.

- **A parent whose daughter had experienced significant health issues and attended the Cottage by the Sea *REEF* program in 2021.** She remembered: Her daughter

> attended the Royal Children's Hospital, so she missed a lot of camp [*REEF*] in the first year ... So initially she came just for an afternoon and then the next camp it was for one night and then two, so gradually as her capacity built, Cottage extended out. So that was mainly through the team leader briefing the staff around her ability, so she would not be required to do the very physical stuff and constant rest, her diet had to be adjusted. And Cottage has been amazing ... they brought around those lovely presents [to her home] ... they are amazing ... they've been a really great support ... they've been probably the most supportive organisation in many ways that we've dealt with.

- **An ex-board member who was on the board of Cottage by the Sea for about 20 years.** He remembered:

> You used to come to the Cottage you would drive in the front, and it would say 'helping parents, helping children and families in need' ... I pushed for that to be changed and for it to be more about fun, inspiration, opportunity, as the kids don't need to be told that they're in need. It sort of moved away from doing charity to we're all in this together ... I think that a big part of the Cottage in my view is community. It's so significant it gives, it adds so much value to the lives of so many people who work, who volunteer and the Queenscliff community should be proud of having the Cottage here and so it's a vibrant place within Queenscliff. it's an organisation with heart ... humanity is really alive and well within the organisation.

- **An ex-principal who attended Cottage by the Sea with students from two schools for about 20 years.** He remembered:

> I was at a school from a low socio-economic area ... we would have an entire class who have struggled to make ends meet. These children are under difficult situations and difficult family lives.
>
> We had an invitation from Cottage to look at kids that fitted the criteria, kids who deserved it and welfare recipient families. And they used to take them for weekends. I saw lives changed, it was incredible what they did, the children when they came back from their experiences, and they never would have had those at all, any experience of surfing and wetsuits and surfboards ... food is magnificent ... it was a magnificent experience and a really positive one.

- **A director of a charitable foundation / referral agency who has been attending Cottage by the Sea with students from their agency for 16 years.** He remembered:

> We work with kids who have been orphaned or abandoned due to their parents' illicit drug use and children who now reside in kinship care ... 80% of our children live with their grandparents, and the rest live with uncles, aunties, extended family ... A lot of our kids have been exposed to a lot of trauma and neglect and abuse. And so, places like Cottage offer not just the incredible experience for the young person, but actually respite for a grandparent carer who could be in their 70s, 80s, it's quite often a single grandmother carer looking after 3 or 4 kids ... Cottage was pretty critical ... it went from one camp a year to two or three or even four or five camps a year. Cottage by the Sea staff are extremely well-versed in dealing with children from traumatised backgrounds.



SCHOOLS

The students, teachers, principals, and parents who participated in this research were from six schools across the state of Victoria.

Two schools are in the East Gippsland district of Victoria. Both had been through the 2019-20 bushfires and the COVID-19 lockdowns throughout 2020. Interviews with the principal, teachers, and groups of students who had attended the *Take a Break* program were undertaken in each school. As one of the principals remembered at the time of the interview:

> This time of year is always a trigger for people ... the fires, we saw the fires ... .there was a fire, it was about a kilometre away ... when we came back to school after the bushfires everyone was exhausted and everyone was tired – some families had lost homes, some farms, lost property, and lost machinery and fences ... The first community meeting that parents went to, a lot of our kids went to that meeting ... they were basically told you need to get out and don't expect anything to be standing when you come back, which had a fairly severe impact on our kids ... lots of kids were distressed by it.
>
> So, Cottage came as part of that bushfire recovery.
>
> It's a calming place. They care about kids, they're invested in kids, they want to make a difference to kids ... they're just so giving of their time and their energy ... it's the experience and the personal growth that kids have that they walk away with.

One school is located within the inner suburbs of Melbourne, Victoria. One teacher commented:

> The school is located right next to the housing commission flats, so we're a pretty low socio-economic status [SES] school, where the majority of the kids live in the flats. We've got a big Horn of Africa demographic. So the majority of the students here have a refugee background, generational trauma, generational poverty ... Big families, students in my class that have 9, 10, 11 siblings and live in 2- or 3-bedroom apartments ... there are kids in my class who speak 3 or 4 languages. They only speak English when they're at school.
>
> Cottage by the Sea, where families are lucky to only have to pay a small sort of price (basically families can't afford it), where it is mostly funded by donations and the community. I was blown away by the staff, the facilities, the activities ... just meeting the students at their point of need – a lot of them hadn't ever been to the beach before let alone go swimming in the ocean, ropes courses. We had kids that just on the bus ride were blown away; they'd never seen the fields of grass.

Another school is located in the northern suburbs of Melbourne. The principal described their school as:

> High percentage of students from a disadvantaged area ... we are rated as high disadvantage and low socio-economic ... high percentage of people who have had trauma backgrounds ... in our school we have very angry children who take on extreme risk-taking behaviour. Our children simply cannot access the regular camps that other schools provide.
>
> We've got such a strong relationship and successful experiences with Cottage by the Sea ... we've gradually increased the percentage of students attending ... Cottage by the Sea is supporting us to decrease the gap [in students' development]. Our parents are incredibly positive and incredibly grateful and thankful.



The final two schools are located in regional areas of Victoria. One of these regional schools has been sending groups to Cottage by the Sea for almost 14 years. The principal and teachers described their school and relationship with Cottage:

> Our school community ... it's 5 generations of poverty. High levels of trauma, 20% of our kids have Indigenous backgrounds, 20% of funded students are on disability funding, and a lot of social housing.
>
> One strength of Cottage by the Sea programs is that under-resourced families need those sorts of experiences ... students that have never been to the beach, never seen the sand, never touched the water ... it was amazing to watch their faces ... it's a whole world they've never seen ... those little things have a huge impact.



The assistant principal of the second regional school also reflected on their relationship with the Cottage as he described the school:

> We have been involved with Cottage for a number of years ... about 8 or 9 years ... we have students with significant trauma and significant disadvantage. We were rated as the 4th highest level of disadvantage in Victoria. So we have significant challenges outside of our school gates. We feed our students ... we clothe all our kids.
>
> The Cottage staff are experts ... there is something innate in order to connect with humans, generally but particularly kids with traumatic backgrounds ... so the staff there, they know what they're doing ... there is a transformative nature to the experiences at the Cottage.



DATA COLLECTION TOOLS

Qualitative data were generated through semi-structured interviews and historical document reviews to gain a nuanced understanding of how Cottage by the Sea programs have shaped individuals' lives over the years. We created a series of questions for the interviews for each of the participant groups around how they felt Cottage by the Sea had provided them with opportunities that had impacted their lives since attending. If someone said something in an interview that we found was particularly interesting, we would also follow that line as well. However, the list of questions for each group ensured consistency in our data. Each interview lasted up to 60 minutes, with group interviews with students and school staff, and individual interviews with principals, leadership, and alumni. The interviews were conducted mostly in person either at Cottage by the Sea or at the schools. However, some interviews were conducted over the internet using Zoom. These interviews were then transcribed and read over by the team to identify themes for this report.

DATA ANALYSIS

We assessed the medium- to long-term impacts of Cottage by the Sea programs by tracking the data we collected from our interviews against the vision, mission, and values of Cottage by the Sea itself, therefore to explore how effectively others see Cottage by the Sea is in meeting these core statements of intent. Initially, the research team collectively reviewed the transcribed data. The final analysis identified four key themes:

1. Fostering Fun and Engagement
2. Building Relationships
3. Providing a Safe Haven
4. (Re)Creating Memories

Theme 1 Fostering Fun and Engagement was developed from Cottage by the Sea's mission 'to provide children with Inspiration, Fun and Opportunity'. While we initially coded for 'opportunity', we realised that opportunity pervades every aspect of the work of Cottage by the Sea. As such, it also pervades every section of the report that follows.

Theme 2 Building Relationships resulted from assigning three of the five Cottage by the Sea's values of respect, belonging, and community into a single theme.

Theme 3 Providing a Safe Haven came out of the coding process itself. Repeatedly, our interviewees spoke of not only the respite they felt at the Cottage but also that it was an oasis of calm and safety. We therefore coded our interviews around this notion of Cottage by the Sea providing people with a safe haven in what can otherwise be turbulent lives.

Theme 4 (Re)Creating Memories was developed from the mission of the Cottage 'to create happy memories'. As such, we end the report findings by considering what participants remembered from their time at Cottage by the Sea and how they felt these memories went on to impact their lives to 'bring hope for a better future'.

We also accessed images from the Cottage by the Sea archive collection and searched the National Library's Trove site for newspaper articles discussing the work of Cottage by the Sea. In addition, we commissioned the taking of a series of photos that captured examples of the four key themes identified in the data. At the centre of this report, we provide some of the outcomes of this research. We also provide a timeline of images of the work of Cottage by the Sea in the hope of providing an even deeper understanding of the opportunities provided by Cottage by the Sea across over 100 years.

Our report moves from **fun** to **memories** – something we believe is also true of the stories of so many of those who attend Cottage by the Sea.



FINDINGS

Cottage by the Sea seeks to provide opportunities to participants and their schools, families, and communities across all aspects of its vision, mission, and five values. As such, our findings are focused on the opportunities Cottage by the Sea provides across these aspects of its programs as these became apparent across our interview data.

We begin with the aspects of the program that are experienced as **fun and enjoyable** by the participants themselves. The opportunities these provide are discussed in terms of the deeper affects and effects these have on the lives of young people as they participate but also, as shown across the research literature, showing the positives joy brings to learning, social engagement, and improved life outcomes.

We then move to consider how Cottage by the Sea **supports, builds, and develops relationships**, not only between the participants themselves but across communities. These relationships form a nexus with Cottage by the Sea at its heart. No single strand to this nexus can be removed without diminishing the whole. Repeatedly in our research, participants made it clear that the true impact of Cottage by the Sea can only be understood by how all aspects of this community are brought together in support of each other.

The difficulty of the task faced by Cottage by the Sea in creating these relationships is particularly evident given that so many of the participants come to the Cottage having experiences of, or continuing to experience, traumatic life events. Our next section therefore considers how Cottage by the Sea **creates a safe haven** for participants and how this provides opportunities that simply could not exist for these participants otherwise. For so many of our participants, the fact Cottage by the Sea proved to be such a safe oasis of care in deeply troubled lives provided the basis on which all other opportunities the Cottage offered could be accessed.

Participants often leave the Cottage with intense **happy memories.** These are composed of so many influences: the friends they have made; the courage they have developed in facing so many 'guided challenges' throughout the activities; and in the gifts and necessities they receive from Cottage, particularly to those most in need. The power of the mementoes provided to participants – some of which have been kept for over 40 years! – as well as the sense of place the Cottage provided for the participants are powerful testimony to the impact the Cottage has had on their lives.

The findings presented in the following sections of the report seek to understand how the dropping of a pebble by Cottage by the Sea into the lives of so many participants can be traced in the ripples formed and as they become waves throughout so many lives.



FOSTERING FUN AND ENJOYMENT: COTTAGE BY THE SEA WAS FUN AND LIFE CHANGING

The key mission of Cottage by the Sea is to enhance the lives of more children by providing fun within a holiday environment through four tailored programs: *Take a Break*, *REEF*, *Mentor*, and *Remote*. It is through these programs that children and young people around the state of Victoria have the opportunity to experience increased happiness and confidence, learn from fun experiences, and engage with others.

THE IMPORTANCE FOR CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE TO EXPERIENCE ENJOYMENT AND FUN

Engagement in enjoyable and stimulating activities, often referred to as 'fun', has garnered increasing attention for its potential impact on learning and development. Enjoyment is often described as a positive psychological affective or emotional state that reflects feelings of fun, pleasure, excitement, joy, and happiness (Eberle, 2014; Papadopoulos et al., 2022). Zosh et al. (2018) characterise playful learning experiences as those that are joyful, meaningful, actively engaging, iterative, and socially interactive – characteristics that facilitate the development and activation of interconnected brain processes that support learning.



Research has shown that there is a strong relationship between fun and enjoyable experiences and the influences of these experiences on cognitive, emotional, and social development across different stages of life (Yogman et al., 2018; Zosh et al., 2018). Together, these fun and enjoyable experiences, such as those offered at Cottage by the Sea, play a crucial role in shaping who children and young people are and how they interact with the world. Recognising the importance of fun and enjoyment in learning and development has far-reaching implications for children and young people's education, mental health, and overall wellbeing.

This theme discusses the findings from interviews with alumni, teachers, students, and parents around their experiences of attending programs at Cottage by the Sea and the strong relationship between these fun and engaging experiences and their learning, emotional wellbeing, and social development.



FUN EXPERIENCES AT COTTAGE BY THE SEA SUPPORT LEARNING: 'HAVE FUN, ENJOY YOURSELF, AND YOU CAN GROW'

Research suggests that engaging in fun activities plays a crucial role in enhancing cognitive development, particularly during early childhood and adolescence. Joyful experiences stimulate dopamine levels in the reward system of the brain, which enhances memory, creativity, and motivation, and links to a person's propensity to learn (Yogman et al., 2018). The evidence of joy, fun, and happiness experienced at Cottage by the Sea was a recurrent narrative in the conversations we had with all participant groups, particularly in relation to how these experiences supported learning and development. As one principal noted:

> that joy ... like the joy just for living ... just to be alive and live life. You know, enjoy the experience, enjoy the moment ... that's important for kids.

A similar link between happiness and development was noted by some of the alumni who attended Cottage by the Sea. For example, one who attended as an eight-year-old in the early 2000s commented that as children:

> They are just enjoying whatever is going on in the moment like it's so important for development ... life isn't serious, you're meant to enjoy it as much as you can ... you've got to have fun ... enjoy what you're doing, because you'll find that you'll actually surprise yourself along the way as an adult.

Another alumni who attended Cottage by the Sea in the 1930s noted that 'playing is just another form of learning', while another participant, who works for a charity foundation that supports children who reside in kinship care, reported on the importance of supporting learning through authentic fun experiences, particularly for children experiencing vulnerability and trauma:

> It's actually teaching kids a little bit more in a fun sense. It's not like you know, putting things up on a whiteboard in a classroom. It's a real hands-on experience ... they don't know that they're learning, they are, they think that they're just out there having fun.

Most participants commented on the impact of experiencing the fun activities at Cottage by the Sea on children's learning when they returned to school. This learning was evident in specific academic subjects, such as writing and mathematics, but was also marked by an increase in children's confidence, willingness to have a go and level of risk-taking. One ex-principal noted that 'undoubtedly, the academic results improved' but also that 'it's about the immediate benefit, about having fun with the other kids'. He also commented that 'because the children are so excited and happy and want to do it, it's the thing about education, you know, to get the children to want to do their maths'.

Other teachers noted that Cottage by the Sea enabled children to be happy, which in turn built their world knowledge and supported them to make connections between these experiences and their academic work. As Hirsh-Pasek et al. (2022, p. 20) argue, providing 'meaningful activities builds on a child's current knowledge by connecting new information to past experiences, resulting in more effective learning ... [and enabling children] to see opportunities for learning in everyday life'.

> If kids are feeling happy and confident in themselves and they're willing to take on a challenge, then it's going to have a flow-on effect, like, they are going to be happier and going to be happier at school and be able to achieve more.

> Like, when we do reading, especially non-fiction reading, it is a lot about building their world knowledge ... when we do writing, it's giving them heaps of things to write about.
>
> They'd make a connection ... they'd be reading something or doing something and, oh, this is like when we were at Cottage, or we did at Cottage ... they wrote reflections on it ... they see each other on a different level.
>
> From that point on [after Cottage by the Sea] we had significant improvement in behaviour and attendance and in academic achievement ... it provides you something, and once you get some momentum in learning then you're off to the races ...The experiences at Cottage, they are infinitely better than any other camp, because they know how to get kids on board ... they are instilling that kind of lifelong learning.

Cottage by the Sea not only helps the children experience fun and joy that carries over to their academic learning but also teaches them more about themselves and how they can take their learnings and apply them to other aspects of their lives. One student commented that they learnt to 'have more fun in your life' and that they were 'improving a lot in their learning'. Other students from a school that had experienced bushfires noted that the experiences at the Cottage had also helped them to learn about themselves. These grade 5/6 students commented:

> If it is too hard, get a bigger shovel. If you're using a little shovel that's too compacted, get a bigger shovel, and just keep digging.
>
> If I try something, and I can do it, then I feel like that I can do something new and maybe that I could do it again another time, it was really fun.
>
> The water, it feels like you're unstoppable. It feels like weight is ... so much lighter in the water. It feels like weight has been dropped off your shoulders. So, in times where I'm stuck, I think about being in the water and that feeling of being under and the weight off my shoulder. It helps me focus and concentrate and keep calm.

Teachers also noted the link between the fun, yet at times challenging, experiences at Cottage by the Sea and the impact of these in building children's independence and in supporting them to move out of their comfort zones. For example, teachers commented that:

> It's about the surfing and all the fun stuff, but also supporting them to be independent ... providing the kids opportunities to fail with support or make mistakes with support or to succeed with support and to learn ... that's priceless.
>
> You're jumping in the ocean where there's waves, and you're in a wetsuit, and you're cold, and you're having fun, though. So, it's okay to be uncomfortable, but that's where you could understand that you can still have fun, enjoy yourself, and you can grow.
>
> About taking kids out of their comfort zone, it's about giving them new experiences, it's about helping them to learn, to have courage, and to persist, to be supportive and cooperative and collaborative through the process ... and coming back knowing that nothing's impossible.

> I think the most important years of childhood adolescence is those key years ... being able to bring kids out of their shells. They're still discovering who they are as a person, and what they want to do in life. And home life is a struggle ... [Cottage] is a nice break, it's a nice lesson to learn. All those key elements and life skills at such an early age, it's important years.
>
> It gave me such depth as a person ... I didn't realise I was getting taught all this stuff ... it's made me such a more talkative person, and open person, and someone that has life experience that couples with life values, like good values.

The long-term impact of these fun and joyful experiences was also evident in the conversations with many of the alumni, who spoke of how Cottage by the Sea supported broader learnings about life and about themselves. For many, at the time of attending the Cottage they were unaware of lifelong learnings that they had gained, but on reflection as an adult they noted that:

> When you send a kid to Cottage, not only are they having fun and creating new friendships and learning different techniques as to how to survive in life in general, but also to actually create their own version of their own life.
>
> All those little activities that you do, you don't think they mean much, they're just fun ... but then you've actually got to work as a team, work to communicate with all the other kids, and all those little skills – resilience.



FUN EXPERIENCES AT COTTAGE BY THE SEA SUPPORT EMOTIONAL DEVELOPMENT: 'I HAD NEVER REALLY EXPERIENCED THAT ELEMENT OF FUN'

Experiencing fun and joy also plays a crucial role in emotional development by providing opportunities for emotional expression, regulation, and social bonding. Positive emotions associated with fun activities promote the secretion of oxytocin, a hormone implicated in social bonding and emotional wellbeing (Kirsch et al., 2005). Moreover, engaging in enjoyable activities in social contexts fosters empathy, cooperation, and emotional intelligence, and reduces stress and anxiety (Zosh et al., 2018).



The level of joy that was experienced by many of the participants while at the Cottage by the Sea and then when returning to school and home was woven throughout all the discussions. These emotions were expressed as increased laughter, talk, engagement, and happiness, and returning to school 'uplifted'. As research has shown, 'when children are engaged in what they are doing, they are invested in the outcomes, and will persist with the activity even in the face of challenges' (Hirsch-Pasek et al., 2022, p. 19).



Parents noted the emotional changes when their children returned home, with feelings of happiness, increased talk at home, reduced stress, and the establishment of strong relationships between their children and their peers as well as between their children and the Cottage by the Sea staff. One parent reflected on her son's time at the Cottage:

> He loved it ... camp was fantastic for him ... it actually opened his eyes ... he's so happy, and he enjoyed his time down there ... his confidence has grown since last year ... he still talks about it.

This parent also noted that it brought 'the kids closer together with the staff that they went with and all the staff that were at Cottage by the Sea', while another noted that both her children who attended Cottage by the Sea were 'happy, happy to talk about their experiences ... it's a stress-free camp'.

Another parent reported on the impact of the Cottage by the Sea on her daughter who had experienced significant health issues and had been isolated from her friends. She commented that Cottage staff had visited her daughter at home and encouraged her to attend one of the programs. She said her daughter:

> had come back happy ... she did really well mentally and really learned how to socialise again ... she was back to herself after camp.





The children also talked about their fun experiences from the moment the Cottage bus picked them up at school to arriving at the Cottage. These emotions of anticipation, excitement, and fun are demonstrated in the following comments:

> This is going to be fun...once we saw the sign, well the bus, there were a heap of pictures of kids having fun and we were like, I can't wait.
>
> First thing we saw was the gate ... we were so excited. We were all like just screaming.
>
> When I first stepped inside, I just remember being very excited because they have the stair up and they also have a swirly sort of slide to get down ... it was fun.

Similarly, many of the principals and teachers commented on their own joy at seeing the children enjoying themselves, which often resulted in building stronger relationships between themselves and the children.

For example, one principal commented that:

> The Cottage bus is ready to turn up, and then when the children get picked up, the engagement is incredibly strong, they're talking and laughing ... and jumping up and down, excitement beyond belief ...

Another ex-principal of a school who had attended Cottage by the Sea for many years shared a memory of the students who had been on a two-hour fishing charter as part of the *Take a Break* program. He reflected on the joy he witnessed as the children engaged in new experiences:

> Those children just spent two hours reeling in squid and watching the squid squirt all over them. And I'd never seen two hours of enjoyment that you've ever seen. It was phenomenal!





The joy on the faces of the children who attended Cottage by the Sea as they engaged in new experiences created lifelong memories for all those who observed. For example, some teachers reflected:

> *His little face as he walked through that door ... that's something I will never forget as a teacher ... there is a transformative nature to experience. ...*
>
> *... she got in the surf and nailed it. She was a gun ... this young girl, beautiful smile on her face, and I can still see her ... all the kids got around her ... .even from a position of joy, when you see the joy on the kid's face ... like that will live with me forever.*

For some alumni, many emotions were triggered by returning to Cottage by the Sea later in life. As adults, the alumni reflected on how it was the happiest part of their childhood and beamed when they told us of the happiness and fun they experienced when they were at Cottage. Reflecting on their time at Cottage they commented that:

> *[Cottage by the Sea] was probably the happiest memory I had in my childhood at all of everything that I had ever done up until I left home that was the best thing that ever happened to me...I'm happy and I'm content ... but it started with what life was like when I stayed at the Cottage. It's a fun place ... there is no stigma attached to the Cottage.*
>
> *I was super happy walking in, because I never had a bad experience there. This place just had good energy, like it just felt good ... then I got really emotional ... I started to tear up ... as a child you just want happiness.*
>
> *The feeling when I walked in, just walking up, little butterflies in my stomach ... my whole childhood was here ... I couldn't wait to come to Cottage to see everybody ... I get emotional talking about it sometimes.*
>
> *I remember crying, because I was graduating [from Cottage] ... I just remember, because we were finishing – I think we were all crying.*

Others felt the Cottage was fun as it allowed children to relax and remove from the traumatic environment and stress:

> *Okay, we've come from a rough upbringing. We've been put here so mum can sort herself out. But we're having fun. We're safe ... So, to kinda disguise that and keep things fun ... to be given that opportunity to breathe and be a kid for a little bit without the outside noise.*
>
> *That opportunity to be happy ... they were just constantly in that worrying and anxiety state ... In a time (bushfires) where families had already lost a lot of things ... on the back of a drought as well ... so, the fact that their kids could still go away and be happy ... so, they [parents] actually needed their kids to just go and be happy and know that they were having fun, having a good time ... it was a way of just going, well, we're going to move forward.*



A parent of a child who attended the Cottage by the Sea over 10 years ago commented that:

> It was really good to know that he's going to go and have fun.
>
> Cottage by the Sea is so good at minimising the barriers, just for kids to feel confident to then just get on with it, enjoying the experience.

Other year 5 students commented that Cottage by the Sea:

> is a fun place to have a break from home and if stuff is happening at home and parents are fighting you can get away.
>
> You could have lots of fun ... get rid of your fears ... get braver without your parents.

FUN EXPERIENCES AT COTTAGE BY THE SEA SUPPORT SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT: 'HAD FUN WITH MY MATES'



Fun activities serve as a vehicle for social interaction and relationship building, which are fundamental aspects of social development across the lifespan. Engaging in shared enjoyable experiences strengthens social bonds and fosters prosocial behaviour, conflict resolution skills, and peer acceptance while supporting a sense of belonging within communities, which is essential for mental health and wellbeing (Putnam, 2012). Similarly, when children and young people are socially interactive they build friendships with others, as well as independence, self-worth, and fulfilment (Hirsh-Pasek et al., 2022; Zosh et al., 2018). Opportunities for social interactions also facilitate language learning, problem-solving, and collaboration, as well as encouraging risk-taking and taking the perspective of others – all important 21st century skills necessary for children and young people to thrive in society. As Hirsh-Pasek et al. (2022, p. 20) argue, 'social interactions are the bedrock for learning and development, from early in infancy throughout life'.

Prominent in the narratives of past participants was the joy they expressed regarding the long-term friends they had made at Cottage by the Sea:

> *I will always look back and say I've still got Sarah [pseudonym], my friend from the Cottage I've still got. You know, I can't wait to see her next, like we kind of look towards the better times.*
>
> *More exciting coming here with your friends, everybody from primary school, doing so many things you wouldn't normally do ... all the friendships ... and I still keep in contact with friends from here.*

Parents also noted the importance of the Cottage by the Sea experiences in supporting their children to make friends and build connections with their peers, teachers, and the staff at the Cottage:

> *I reckon they've built such a good bond with others ... They have maintained the friendships and the connections.*
>
> *I think that they're developing lifelong friendships and connections with their classmates.*

Students also noted that they:

> *had fun with my mates, just playing around the water. And I would say like waking up was also kind of fun, because you just had everyone there ... that was fun.*

They also commented on the friendships that they formed with the Cottage staff. As one student noted:

> *I meet grown-ups and say they're my friend, but sometimes they are, sometimes they're not. But I'm pretty sure we were friends, I was friends with John [pseudonym], a worker.*

Others commented on the changed dynamics of the children when they returned to school. As two principals noted, the students:

> *Definitely had stronger connections when they came back ... they had a really strong connection as a group of kids that have been on camp together, been through some challenges together, had a whole heap of fun together, bunked in a room together ... it just brings people closer together ... they definitely came back with this sense of 'I feel like I belong, I belong with these people'.*

And they:

> *unified as a cohort ... because not only is it about the teachers seeing a different version of them, the children are also seeing each other ... to connect as a team.*

The prosocial impacts of Cottage by the Sea were also highlighted by many of the principals and teachers, who commented:

> To do things, because they do it collectively ... it's like shared experience, they've got that bond, and that social connection immediately when they come back to school ... after camp you could see that they've definitely come out of their skin.

For one student, who was a non-native speaker and English language learner, the teacher commented that:

> It seemed to be camp was a bit of a turning point. She really came out of her shell ... it was being in that different environment, being able to just sort of relax and discuss, and chat with her friends ... I've never heard her talk so much. And as soon as we got back to school, it just stayed.

An alumni who had participated in the *Take a Break*, *REEF*, and Mentor programs commented that the skills she had learnt at the Cottage had helped her with her future career, stating that it:

> opened myself out of my shell. I was very quiet, and I didn't like confrontation ... being at Cottage just helped me ... slowly, but surely, I turned into the most loudest, giggliest, and wouldn't stop talking.



IN SUMMARY

Cottage by the Sea provides participants with opportunities to experience fun and enjoyment in every aspect of their programs. Fun is centrally positioned as an organisational core aim of its mission. Fun and enjoyment provide opportunities to relieve stress and to increase wellbeing and are linked to higher academic achievement in school tasks. Findings from our research show that Cottage by the Sea provided fun and enjoyment for all the participants, which brought about greater engagement and supported students to be ready to learn, interact more with their peers and become more resilient across the ups and downs of life. Positive outcomes were reported for the children and young people themselves, their peers, their teachers and parents, and communities more generally. In particular, the participants believe that the Cottage gave them the chance to have fun and to enjoy themselves, and this was among the best parts of the program. Cottage by the Sea excels in providing an environment where children and young people can have fun, enjoy themselves, and thrive.



BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS

The relationships we discuss in this section are not simple but rather multiple and complex. Firstly, they are relationships to place, to the location of Cottage by the Sea and how this differs from the locations where the young people live. Then there are the relationships that exist between the Cottage by the Sea's mission and vision for interacting with young people and the possibilities these open for those attending. Finally, there is the sense of community that the Cottage provides children and young people and how they respond and understand their role within this community.

These three spaces are linked to the ideas that Soja (1996) articulated in his book *Thirdspace*, where 'first space' is the physical, 'real' space of a given location, something that can be drawn on maps or shown on architectural drawings. 'Second space' is the intended meaning of a location, in this case, as somewhere children can experience belonging and community, while 'third space' is what encompasses the lived experience of those within that location. It is the second and third of these spaces we discuss in this section.



Primarily, relationships are built on trust and respect. As will be made clear in what follows, Cottage by the Sea works very hard to ensure respectful relationships between students but also to encourage students to feel respected and listened to. Their voices are encouraged and their concerns and even fears are heard (Hartung, 2017). This is not only a case of hearing the voices of young people when they echo the adult voices around them. Rather, their own voices, often quivering at first with their fears and concerns, become louder as they meet the challenges Cottage by the Sea offers them (Kelly, 2021).

The young people are welcomed to Cottage by the Sea and provided with spaces and support that enables links to be forged between them and the Cottage community, and reforged with their teachers and fellow students, allowing them to reimagine their place within the Cottage, their schools, and their homes. The care and concern shown to them allows them to make choices many of them admit would otherwise remain a dream.

Belonging is a complex, 'relational, provisional and, at times, uncertain process' (McLeod, 2018, pp. 305-315), made more difficult by the constraints on time imposed by the short stays that so many young people have at Cottage by the Sea. Belonging is built by the attention shown to individuals and to the collective needs of the young people who attend, and in their desire to enjoy everything Cottage by the Sea has to offer as a place where they can feel at home. As one teacher said, 'They were saying, we were scared at the start, we didn't know what to expect. And once they got there, it felt like we were at home.' In this way, many of the lessons learned by these young people are not those that they may believe them to be but rather things that are otherwise seemingly incidental and learned through their lived experiences. These experiences are not constructed by mandated instruction or taught by rote but rather through joy. The young people's sense of belonging arises 'from specific practices that involve the making of those who belong ... and [are] welcomed as belonging' (McLeod, 2018, p. 311).



Children and young people learn to belong by being engaged in the world that Cottage by the Sea creates and where belonging becomes possible.

Cottage by the Sea makes a conscious effort to begin building relationships with the children who attend their programs from their very first interaction, often the moment they get onto the bus. This was repeatedly noted across our interviews and other data. Sometimes these relationships go on to last a lifetime.

Teachers, as professionals, notice the efforts Cottage staff go to in creating a positive environment for the development of interpersonal relationships:

> The programs are centred on the relationship with the kids, and you can see it ... It's not about the experience, and it's not transactional. It's actually, really invested in building trust with the kids straight away.

This is understood by teachers as the result of conscious efforts by Cottage by the Sea:

> I think there's really strong leadership down there that has trained staff to interact with kids in a really positive way.

This is shown by how quickly staff learned the names of the children and their willingness to do more than the minimum to get to know the children:

> So, I noticed when I was in there, they just said, right we're going to, and they just, even new staff that came on, knew all the names by, you know, within an hour or something, that name, and it brought that personal touch as well. And then to be out doing activities, and the leaders are talking to the kids and using their names, like that was, that's, I think, a really powerful thing ... it is a bit of a respect thing too, like they respect the kids as people, not just 'this is my job, I've got to do this, don't do this, don't do that'. Like they talk to them like, like they will literally talk to them when they don't have to, like they just talk and have a chat.

A student also stressed the importance of learning their names in their interview:

> We only told them once. They asked us once and they're just hello Jacob [pseudonym], like you're the first human on earth to ever remember my name after. Everyone forgets my name the first time, that's just my name, but magic.

As educational professionals, the teachers and principals particularly noted the level of care shown by staff, making it clear that Cottage by the Sea staff saw their role as much more than just a job:

> I think that you can really see that they care. Like they want to make a difference. Sorry, I'll get all emotional over all of this ... It's calming, isn't it? It's a calming place. But they care about kids, they're invested in kids, I think, more than anything, like they want to make a difference for kids.
>
> The way in which the team at the Cottage by the Sea engage with our kids is second to none. They – they're just so informed around how to engage with kids who have levels of trauma or lack – that risk-taking behaviour that are good, calculated risks, because they just haven't had those experiences. So, they just massage conversations so beautifully to get the kids to engage in things. And it's just they build trust really quickly with the kids.

These manifestations of concern are reflections of three out of five of Cottage by the Sea's core values: **respect**, **community**, and **belonging**. This section of the report focuses on each of these values in turn, discussing how these recurred across the interviews held with students, alumni, teachers, principals, and parents.

COTTAGE BY THE SEA PROMOTES RESPECT: 'THEY TRUST THE KIDS'

Respect is neither a singular nor simple concept. Cottage by the Sea ensures that the expectation is that respect will be reciprocal, shown by the children attending and shown to them as well.

From their first moments in the programs, children and young people are made aware of consistent and fair consequences, and the importance of proactive strategies to ensure they are safe and supported during their time at Cottage by the Sea. As a teacher said:

> I think they do it really well at the start when they basically sit everyone down, and talk about the rules of the camp, and there's [a] three-warning system, or we ring your parents if you do this. And then the last strike is you're sort of going ... yeah, and we sort of talk about respect, and respecting each other, respecting the staff, respecting the equipment. So, and we're all there to have a good time.

This respect is established by more than the threat of punitive sanctions. The rules in themselves were not seen by a teacher as enough to ensure a positive experience for the children, who felt the program was:

> very homely, like the staff there are amazing, they talk to the kids like they're real people and like they actually care about them, not saying that they don't, but they clearly care about what they do and, you know, the kids that come through there. And they're kind of trusted as well, like they trust the kids, they give the kids this bit of trust to do the right thing and I think that's really healthy.

The students also reflected on the positive atmosphere created by having rules and consequences established from the beginning of the camp. The following are two conversations recorded between our interviewers and groups of students:

> Student: Yeah, the rules and you have to sign your name. You try not to break some of those things, because you signed your name on the whiteboard.
>
> Interviewer: So, you had to sign your name once you decided on what they were?
>
> Student: Yeah.
>
> Interviewer: And how did that make you feel?
>
> Student: Better because before that I was very, a lot ruder and –
>
> Student: It felt professional.
>
> Interviewer: What's that?
>
> Student: Professionalism. I felt like I was signing a contract, a proper – well technically we were signing a contract. We were trying, we were signing the Cottage by the Sea rules contract so ...

In another interview, we invited students to comment on how they felt about having to sign this contract:

> Calm and collected, because then no one would get hurt when we were going to play on the playground. And no one would be arguing.
>
> Maturity – it would be, some people are just silly and aren't mature, but I feel like having the – having the 3 strikes, everyone was a lot more proper, worrying about being sent home. Because you don't want to get sent home from a camp because [the teacher] will lose her marbles at you. I feel like everyone ... maturity.

Too often the idea of respect carries the expectation that respect will be something shown by the students to each other, or to their teachers or to Cottage staff, but not something that would be shown to them. As has already been discussed, teachers were particularly impressed by the genuine levels of respect staff showed to the students. However, this respect is shown across Cottage by the Sea in multiple ways.

One of the ways in which respect is shown to children is how the programs, premised on challenging children *out of their comfort zones* and to take risks they otherwise would not, is the concern shown in differentiating the limits of a child's comfort zone. A teacher explained:

> There are some kids that have been to the beach before, but there's – you know, even when we went boogie boarding, there were kids that [were] fairly terrified of the water. And they were really good at accommodating, not forcing them to do something they really want to do. But they made sure that they could get their best experience possible.

Many of the children made it clear that they had been initially terrified to take part in some of the proposed activities. The challenge, discomfort, and even fear that many of these activities presented to the children was evident, yet so many of the children also made it clear that without the encouragement and reassurance they received from Cottage by the Sea staff, they would never have attempted these activities, something that will be discussed in much more depth later in this report. Invariably, the respect shown by staff provided the basis of trust that encouraged these children to accept the risk of the challenges they faced, which later supported the development of their own sense of self-respect and even courage. A student summed this up by saying:

> So, when we didn't want to do anything, they would like, give us – encourage us and give us some courage to do it and tell them that nothing bad would happen.

As will be discussed later in this report, this was not only true of the seemingly dangerous aspects of the program – from bodyboarding to rope climbing – but also in a willingness to try new foods or foods the children had previously tried and decided they did not like. Such changes and willingness to take risks do not happen by accident but are the outcome of close and careful attention to the dynamics of a child's behaviour when a relationship of shared trust and respect is allowed to develop. These outcomes themselves speak to how well Cottage by the Sea staff judge the boundaries of the children under their care and provide opportunities that help them to surpass these boundaries without shame or humiliation.

The concept of respect extends to all aspects of Cottage by the Sea, particularly in those material aspects that might not otherwise be considered in the context of care, concern or respect, including the location of the site, the attention paid to the maintenance of the property and the overall design of the built environment. Repeatedly in the interviews, the children said how special they were made to feel by the quality of the facilities. When asked what they thought of the building:

> Oh, it was so ...
>
> Wow.
>
> It was amazing.
>
> So cool.

Almost every group of children we interviewed mentioned the slide between the first and ground floors.

> When I got in, I brought my bag in, and I was like, oh my god, there's a slide.

The idea of a slide between floors is very much like something the children themselves might have suggested if they had been asked to design the perfect holiday building.

The breathtaking beauty of the location was also commented on, not merely for the opportunities it offered in easy access to the beach but also for the views of the ocean.

> You had views and stuff so you could, when you walked say down to the bottom floor to have breakfast, you could, there was windows instead of walls and you could see trucks, no, ships coming in and it was really cool to watch.

This level of care and attention to the interests of the children in providing a holiday location otherwise well beyond the budgets of either their parents or their schools is displayed throughout all aspects of Cottage by the Sea. Even when these are not directly commented on by the interview participants, each act builds on the overall sense that Cottage by the Sea deeply respects the children it provides services for and seeks to do so in every way available to them.

> Very nice people. They were respectful to all of us, and we respected them back.
>
> They're kind, because you can talk to them about something private and they'll keep it to them[selves], and they are always there for you and it's just nice to see that.

COTTAGE BY THE SEA BUILDS COMMUNITY: 'A BIG PART OF THE COTTAGE IS COMMUNITY'



The programs offered by Cottage by the Sea would not be possible without the support and donations provided from across the Australian community. Cottage by the Sea makes it clear on their website that their 'programs do not receive any government funding. We rely on the kindness and generosity of the community to continue moving forward as we have since the founding of our charity in 1890' (Cottage by the Sea, 2024).

Given that many of the programs at Cottage by the Sea last less than a week, it might seem that building a sense of community with participants would be difficult. However, once again, the ability to build community was repeatedly acknowledged within the interviews as a key attraction of the program, not least for how the program helped build connections between the children and Cottage staff but also the connections between the students themselves, and between the students and their teachers. As one teacher said:

> it actually made them a stronger group together. So, they sort of used it as a get to know you, we got to know everybody, and they got to learn about each other in a different setting.

This was also noted by a teacher who witnessed the assistance that the children showed towards one another:

> You know, you help each other get your wetsuit on and you help each other to carry the boards down and you help each other to – not running into each other and you stop and you're considerate of what other people are doing while you're surfing. And, you know, and if someone's not game to jump in with the seals, you know, or jump on the net at the back of the boat and be tagged along with the water, there's always that voice of



> encouragement from the kids and it was always – it was just something that happened naturally for kids, you know?

Sometimes the teachers acknowledged that it was not only getting to spend more time interacting with their students that helped build a sense of community and understanding but also the opportunities the program provided teachers to simply observe.

> So, you get that opportunity to watch, and observe and start to really think about what we can do when the kids are back here.

This opportunity, in turn, provides further opportunities to strengthen relationships so that they move beyond those that are possible in the school environment alone.

> it strengthens our relationships with the kids, but it strengthens the relationships between the kids as well, which is really, really good.

A student also reflected on this relationship-building with their teachers, saying:

> Most of our teachers said ... and they're always dealing with us and they're always really grumpy, but they weren't as moody when they came back. They were chill.

One of the alumni interviewed said that the Cottage built a sense of community by simultaneously ensuring the children did not feel like outcasts:

> Really, there's a whole different attitude, because it sort of moved a little bit away from 'we're doing charity to we're all in it together'. That's how I feel. I mean the staff never had the charity view, but I think a lot of the... and a big part of the Cottage in my view is community.

Parents also mentioned that one of the benefits of the program was that it provided an opportunity for the teachers to get a better understanding of their children and that this would have an ongoing positive impact.

> I just think that it will just bring the kids closer together with the staff that they went with, but all the staff that were at the Cottage by the Sea. That just, that kind of when you go away together it sort of, outside of the school surroundings, that it would create a bit more community and probably a lot of more resilience.

Other research (Savage et al., 2005) makes the point that the role children play in building community is rarely acknowledged. We turn to the question of belonging and how Cottage by the Sea navigates this next.



COTTAGE BY THE SEA SUPPORTS BELONGING: 'WE FEEL WELCOMED'

Belonging can have both positive and negative connotations. While none of us wants to feel excluded from those around us, we also do not want to feel that we will only be welcomed if we assimilate to community norms in ways that deny our uniqueness and difference (McLeod, 2018).

This idea of Cottage by the Sea providing a space for young people to be accepted and to belong, without compromising the sense of their own identity, is summed up by a teacher:

> We have one female in our class who is very, she wasn't ostracised, she almost did it herself, but post Cottage by the Sea you could see she was part of the whole again and little things like that. Hard to observe, but when you notice them, you go, oh, that's pretty cool.

Developing a sense of belonging is something the Cottage staff encourage from the first moments of interaction between them and the children. But the fact that, as a student said, the program felt like 'a whole class sleepover' also meant that students felt this was a time when they could expand their circle of friends.

> It helped us – it helped me by – with my friends, because I didn't have many friends in my class, more in like the other class and I got new friends and found out more about people.
>
> Because I've like, changed – changed the people I've been hanging out with.

Cottage by the Sea provides a welcoming space for children, while being premised on the idea that belonging can also involve a willingness to take risks and to try things you might not otherwise.

Children are encouraged to feel that they belonged to the wider Cottage by the Sea community by the fact that they are each provided with various handmade items donated by volunteers. It would be nearly impossible to overstate the impact this had on the children, particularly on their sense of belonging to the Cottage community. As a parent said:

> Because they get noticed, they get valued, they get respected, they get loved on, they get ... with all these gifts. They get all these things to do and it's wow, I don't even get this at home.

The children also frequently spoke of these gifts:

> I think there was someone that just knitted it for us, and we could take home.

A parent stressed how the clothing their child received acted as a memento of their time at Cottage:

> He got a beanie, he got, I think they were slippers or something, I don't know what they were, but he, he keeps wearing them. He thinks they're grouse.

Overall, the efforts made by Cottage by the Sea staff to welcome the children is perhaps best summed up by the end of an interview where the children where asked what they felt they had learned from the program, and they all began excitedly speaking over each other:

> Student: To be grateful for what we got.
>
> Student: We felt like we belonged there.
>
> Student: It was like – it was like home, that we fit in like home.

IN SUMMARY

Building relationships is core to the everyday practices at Cottage by the Sea. These practices include the deep relationships the organisation has with those who contribute to its ongoing success, including those who make financial contributions to sustaining its properties and programs, and those who donate their time and effort in making the gifts the children receive with such great joy. A major characteristic of Cottage by the Sea programs is to encourage participants to display respect, which is achieved by creating an environment that expects respectful behaviour and interactions between the children and staff but also by showing deep levels of respect for, and acceptance of, the children and young people themselves. This respect is shown to the children from their very first interactions with Cottage staff. They are encouraged to feel they belong to the Cottage by the Sea community and this feeling of belonging makes it easier for the children and young people to then engage in respectful interactions with Cottage staff, their own teachers, and their peers.

THE IMPACT OF COTTAGE BY THE SEA

1935–1940

'It was a major event for us kids from the country ... seeing the world in a totally different aspect.'

1960–1970

'It was the best thing that ever happened to me!'

'It put me on the right path.'

1995–2005

'The smallest of things that can really change a child's life!'

'It gives you hope.'









VOICES OF PARTICIPANTS: 1939-2024

2006-2015

'It sets you up for life!'

'It's changed my life!'

'Cottage gave me everything I've pretty much ever had!'

2020s

'I learnt that I've got more in me than I thought!'

'It was so fun!'

'It was actually quite magical.'







PROVIDING A SAFE HAVEN

VULNERABILITY AND TRAUMA

Childhood vulnerability can arise from a variety of situations and events, including economic hardship, family instability and social exclusion, as well as natural disasters, such as bushfires, floods, earthquakes and pandemics. However, in the case of the Cottage by the Sea program participants, not all children experience these vulnerabilities. Notably, even those who do face such challenges often do not perceive themselves to be disadvantaged. Instead, they tend to focus on the opportunities for engaging and challenging activities.

The self-perception of children notwithstanding, childhood trauma associated with adverse experiences – such as abuse, neglect, violence, poverty or exposure to disasters – is pervasive, whether recognised or not (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Household instability (e.g. parental substance abuse or mental illness) can disrupt a child's sense of safety and stability, often leading to trauma (Van der Kolk, 2015). The COVID-19 pandemic also resulted in abrupt disruption of daily routines, closure of schools and community support services, economic hardships within families, increased exposure to domestic violence and substance abuse, and the loss of loved ones (Hagan et al., 2022). In many cases, these challenges exacerbated the traumas of children experiencing vulnerabilities.

The prevalence of childhood trauma is alarming, with studies indicating that a significant portion of children globally have experienced at least one traumatic event by the time they reach adulthood (Curtis, 2024). In Australia, trauma affects a substantial number of children and young people (QUT & ACF, 2020).

Childhood trauma carries consequences that can impact individuals throughout their lives. It leaves lasting imprints on their psyche, hindering their ability to engage effectively with their surroundings and impeding their educational and social development. In other words, trauma impairs cognitive abilities, hinders emotional regulation and undermines interpersonal relationships (Van der Kolk, 2015). Trauma not only hinders learning but also often surfaces in disruptive behaviour.



COTTAGE BY THE SEA AS A SAFE HAVEN

Addressing childhood vulnerability and trauma necessitates a comprehensive approach built on collaboration among various stakeholders within and outside the school community. Central to this partnership is a commitment to establishing safe and nurturing environments where children can flourish and develop a sense of belonging.

Outdoor educational opportunities offered in short-stay camp programs can provide a secure environment where children can temporarily escape the stressors and triggers of their everyday lives (Cohen, 2022). Immersed in the natural world, children and young people can connect with the healing power of nature, alleviating stress, anxiety and trauma while fostering emotional wellbeing (Mulholland & O'Toole, 2021, pp. 329–340). By offering opportunities for exploration, self-discovery and personal growth, outdoor education and camping experiences can play a transformative role in the lives of vulnerable youth, helping them to overcome adversity and build a foundation for a brighter future.



The mission of Cottage by the Sea to is support individuals to reignite their trust in society by demonstrating the presence of caring community members who will support them. Providing a safe haven lies at the core of Cottage by the Sea's mission. From its inception, the Cottage has been recognised as a haven of healing and rejuvenation for children.

In 1897, *The Age* newspaper reported:

> The Cottage is … where children who have been sick can grow strong again; **where tired, pale-faced little ones can stay, and gain rosy cheeks**, whilst they play about on the seashore' (The Age, 1897, 11 December, emphasis added).

Further, during the severe economic depression of 1930, Cottage by the Sea opened its doors to children experiencing 'sickness and distress'. A newspaper story published in November 1930 noted:

> Usually the Cottage is closed for two months (July and August) every year to give the matron and staff a holiday. This year, owing to there being so much sickness and distress (due to the prevailing depression) the cottage was closed only for one month and there have been over 400 children cared for there. (KFP & RDSA, 1930, p. 3)

The *Take a Break* program is designed to provide inspiration, enjoyment, and opportunity for young people facing vulnerability. The program offers children diverse activities intended to ignite their curiosity and stimulate personal growth, all within a fun and interactive learning environment. It encourages them to engage in activities that promote physical activity, wellbeing, confidence, and respectfulness. These experiences also serve to instil a sense of belonging and hope for the future among children living with vulnerability and trauma (Paatsch et al., 2023, p. 62). Through short camping opportunities, Cottage by the Sea aims to provide children experiencing vulnerabilities with safety, freedom, and inspiration. It seeks to foster children's sense of community and hopefulness about their future.

For the participants who were interviewed as part of this study, a majority had participated in the *Take a Break* program and hailed from areas marked by social disadvantage, where a significant portion were likely to be grappling with varying degrees of vulnerability. Some came from local government areas often affected by natural disasters, including bushfires and floods. Research indicates that children in regional Victoria are more susceptible to adverse experiences compared to their counterparts in urban areas (Masters et al., 2020). Children from relatively greater socio-economic disadvantage areas are also likely to face adverse physical and psychological health (Wang & Geng, 2019).

As the accounts we documented in this study suggest, by immersing children in safe and natural environments, Cottage by the Sea programs reduce stress and foster a sense of empowerment. The programs provide children with a safe and supportive environment to engage in challenging and fun activities and establish positive relationships with their peers and caring adults. These opportunities help children tackle feelings of isolation while fostering a sense of belonging. Here, we briefly highlight what parents, alumni, children, teachers, and school leaders say about the role of the Cottage in providing trauma-impacted children and young people with a sanctuary.



COTTAGE BY THE SEA PROVIDES SAFETY FOR YOUNG PEOPLE WHO EXPERIENCE TRAUMA: 'MY HOME LIFE WAS HORRIFIC'

An alumni who had attended Cottage by the Sea as a pre-teen in the late 1960s reminisced about her time at the Cottage, cherishing the memories of her experiences there. She vividly remembers the difficult circumstances of her home environment during that period and describes the Cottage as her sanctuary. It provided her with solace and respite from the violence and deprivation she faced at home. She commented:

> Well, you've got to understand ... it was really, really rough, and my home life was horrific. So just that freedom where the beach was like I didn't have to worry about men, you know, being careful around men or anything like that. I was totally away from that whole environment, and I know it sounds strange, but it showed me that there is another way for people to live and made me realise that I wanted to live like that, not the way I was living at home.

The participants appreciated that there was no stigma associated with being at the Cottage. Many of the children and young people saw it as 'a fun place' while still providing them with significant support. One alumni offered an insightful observation about why the Cottage by the Sea experience can be more impactful for a child than might be the case when engaging with a social worker alone:

> Well, children don't really relate to people talking to them. I believe that they relate to what they're doing and what they're seeing. Like they go to the Cottage, they see that they do this and they do that, and they think, you know, 'Well, why aren't I doing that at home?' It's such a simple thing. 'Why aren't I having a shower every day?' and they start questioning things whereas a social worker talking to them telling them they should have a shower every day is not the same as experiencing it and then going home.



COTTAGE BY THE SEA CREATES JOYFUL RETREAT SPACES: 'IT'S A FUN PLACE TO HAVE A BREAK FROM HOME'

Many children face challenges in their home lives. One alumni, now in her late 20s, recalls her time at Cottage by the Sea's *Take a Break* program during her childhood, describing it as more like her second home. She emphasised how the program serves as a sanctuary for children dealing with significant challenges:

> Home life is a struggle for many kids still with their parents. And I remember a lot of kids always looking forward to going to Cottage and never sort of looking forward to going home because there was just so much going on.



As one parent reflected on her son's experience on the *Take a Break* when he was nine years old, now in his 20s, she reported that she holds the program in high regard for giving her son opportunities to find solace from the challenges he encountered at home, enabling him to enjoy moments of happiness within a nurturing environment. She reflected:

> it was just nice to see him go off and be a kid and not have all these other worries that were going on at the time, so that was really good ... it was really good to know ... he doesn't have to worry about all this other rubbish that's going on for a week or a weekend or whatever. So that was really good.

Students were asked whether they would recommend Cottage by the Sea to other students. One student from a primary school in regional Victoria highlighted the profound significance of taking a break from a dysfunctional home environment. She said (emphasis added):

> I recommend going [to Cottage] because it's like – it's a fun place to **have a break from home** and if stuff is happening at home and parents are fighting, you can get away for like a week or so and go there.

COTTAGE BY THE SEA INSPIRES OPTIMISM: 'IT GIVES YOU HOPE'

One of the alumni fondly recalls her formative years at Cottage by the Sea during primary school. Now, at 29, she acknowledges the profound influence the Cottage has had on children facing adversity at home. She observed how children contending with challenges at home discover a haven of comfort and safety within its nurturing environment:

> They [Cottage by the Sea] have done a good job to, like, really make you feel like you are in a safe environment, 'cos I had no idea that's what it was about, and I think that's the most important part, especially 'cos kids can pick up on, you know, the emotions of their parents, and adults and whatever else have you. So, to kinda disguise that and keep things fun.
>
> It's almost like it gives you hope, as a child ... off of what we'd gone through as children. You know what I mean?

Children may face significant challenges and hardships in their lives, but those experiences should not define the rest of their lives. Short-stay camps such as Cottage by the Sea's *Take a Break* program offer a beacon of hope and opportunity. One of the alumni participants echoed this by saying:

> Sometimes, some people might look at the children as victims, which is a bit of a strong word, but when you can kind of flip that switch and be grateful for it, and grateful that that is happening in your life, and it really does shape you as a better human, because you do understand that it's not all dark clouds and lightning. There is a rainbow at the end of it.

By embracing challenges and seizing opportunities, individuals can grow and become better equipped to navigate life's ups and downs.

Against a backdrop of generational trauma and financial hardship, many students encounter barriers to participating in school activities like camps. Cottage by the Sea's programs present opportunities these students might otherwise never experience. A teacher at a primary school in metropolitan Melbourne contrasts the challenges his students encounter with the opportunities provided by Cottage by the Sea:

> So, we are a pretty low SES school ... So, things like camps, we just haven't run, because it's a cost that our families can't afford. So, something like Cottage by the Sea, where families are lucky enough to only have to pay a small sort of price, where it is mostly funded by donations, and the community. Yeah, I was blown away by the staff, the facilities, the activities ... just meeting the students at their need of – you know a lot of them hadn't ever been to the beach before, let alone go swimming in the ocean, in ropes courses, and that sort of thing.

The teacher highlights the financial barriers that restrict opportunities for children in low socio-economic status schools, especially those with refugee backgrounds who may also be impacted by intergenerational trauma. Against this backdrop, the impact of Cottage by the Sea's *Take a Break* program could be transformative. By providing access to activities, including ocean swimming and ropes courses, the program not only expands children's experiences but also fosters resilience.

IN SUMMARY

A significant number of participants who attended Cottage by the Sea programs have lived experiences of trauma. This trauma may be attributed to family environments, experiences of war and of being refugees, and of living through natural disasters, including bushfires and floods. Cottage by the Sea provides these children with a non-judgemental environment where they can experience trust while being nurtured to develop their own sense of trusting relationships with Cottage by the Sea staff, their teachers, and their peers.

Such an environment works to disrupt life-course trajectories by reframing pathways and aspirations. The Cottage achieves this by creating safe interactional environments, respecting the very different needs of all children who take part in its programs, and providing support based on their individual needs.



(RE)CREATING HAPPY MEMORIES: ENABLING AFFECTIVE CONNECTIONS THROUGH PLACE, PEOPLE AND ARTEFACTS … THAT ENDURE!

Core to the mission of Cottage by the Sea is the intent to offer opportunities to create happy memories for the children and young people engaged across a range of programs and activities. This mission gains extra significance when working with cohorts of children and young people experiencing vulnerability, including individuals impacted by trauma. While each of the themes discussed above demonstrates the ways in which participant experiences with Cottage by the Sea become impactful through fun and enjoyment, relationships, and feeling safe and supported, in this theme we consider the intersecting ways in which affective experiences of place, people, and artefacts (or mementoes) collectively support engagement during visits to Cottage by the Sea and also



work to create happy memories that are relived and endure beyond the programs. While the 'capturing of human emotions and affective responses to, in and from place, has remained an elusive but ongoing topic of considerable interest', it is recognised 'that emotions are central to how places/spaces are made and understood, and are individually and collectively felt' (Foley, 2022, p. 109).

As outlined in Theme 2, belonging and community are important values in building relationships. This theme discusses how these two values can be understood as a stimulus for creating happy memories. In considering the various ways in which belonging and community, enabled through relationships, become central to participant memories of their time at Cottage by the Sea, participants consistently reflected on the ways in which respectful modelling of behaviour and shared expectations of Cottage staff promoted participant safety and fostered a sense of community-mindedness in which all participants were supported to try new things. When considered alongside the gifting of particular artefacts (or mementoes), the sense of care conveyed through these artefacts was a powerful driver of affective connections to a happy experience. Beyond the initial happy memory of their time at Cottage by the Sea, however, were examples in the data where these artefacts 'do work' in (re)creating these memories, when participants have long left their experiences at the Cottage. A key interest here is in interrogating 'the ways in which spaces can be turned into places, a process of place-making in which names and naming are of key significance ... how people describe these empowering places, in particular, in the context of emotions and affective practices' (Ainiala & Olsson, 2021, p. 9).

In building on the ways in which emotion and joy was discussed in Theme 1, the premise here is that affect, or emotion, becomes central to understanding the ongoing impact that experience/s with place (and its people) can engender among participants. As others have argued in their research of informal learning environments, 'affective life experienced ... is essential to how programs are sustained, or not, over time. Experiences of making place ... can generate feelings of belonging that are essential for persistent individual and collective learning, especially as that learning contributes to sustainable systems of change' (Ehret & Hollett, 2016, p. 250). Importantly, understanding lived experiences through affective accounts of social life and 'with feelings of belonging is not only a potential effect of education change, but it is also an ongoing constituent experience of making change' (Ehret & Hollett, 2016, p. 250). Put simply, it is the affective memories created through the intersections of people and place, and the artefacts that become mementoes of these happy memories, that we argue creates and sustains impactful change for the participants who attend Cottage by the Sea.





COTTAGE BY THE SEA NURTURES AFFECTIVE CONNECTIONS: 'COTTAGE BY THE SEA IS AN ORGANISATION WITH HEART'

The importance of Cottage by the Sea as a 'place' – physical, social, and cultural – is a recurrent narrative in the conversations we had with all participant groups. Cottage by the Sea encapsulates a place-based orientation that connects to the sea, coastline, and the social values of a small regional town – culminating in ways that create a sense of belonging and community through the experience of attending Cottage by the Sea. Prominent in the narratives of past participants is a sense that 'memorable experiences' at the Cottage afforded a strong emotive connection to the 'place'.

As one alumni participant noted:

> I was really sick, in the infirmary, ... I got pneumonia after my first week but ... right in front of the window of the sick bay ... you could see the big overseas boats coming before the war ... for boys impacted by the bushfires in Northern Victoria in 1939 ... the benefits as an 8-year-old in terms of what you can see and the people ... it was a very big experience ... it seemed like a big deal for an 8-year-old back then.

A key example of the ways in which the physical environment and location of Cottage by the Sea has endured in the memories of past attendees is illustrated below:

> Well, what I remember, of course, is the beach, because that would have been the first time I'd ever seen the beach – I remember these massive – these big sand dunes and these little areas where you would be surrounded by trees, but then there would be a massive patch of sand, and we would go there and have a picnic. It was just mind boggling at the time. It was just so fantastic ... Yeah, they used to have an old tram down the bottom of the garden, and we used to play in the tram ... It was such a great place and any time I see a beach Cottage just jumps straight into my mind ... every time! It was probably the happiest memory I had in my childhood at all, of everything that I had ever done up until I left home that was the best thing that ever happened to me.

As others explain, associations to place manifest in perceptions and experiences to 'create place bonds' (Foley, 2022, p. 112), largely through the feelings and emotions evoked through various activities. Relationships to Cottage by the Sea staff established quickly, with generosity and care bestowed to participants through gifts, healthy meals, and everyday items from 'the cupboard', and through experiences of social and communal living in a building designed to create deliberate connections for those who visit.

This research has focused on capturing the narratives of a wide range of stakeholders engaged with the Cottage and has been important in showing 'how there were multiple, often competing stories, to be captured from the same place' (Foley, 2022, p. 112). While understanding the impact of Cottage by the Sea, engagement across such a diverse range of participants that span many decades (and socio-historical points in time) is slippery to capture. However, common to many of the narratives was a sense of the ways in which 'place bonds' established during initial visits endured and were often relived through recurrent visits or engagement in volunteer or benefactor activities.

As one past-participant explained:

> I only went for one session, I don't think they had the variety of, well, what they have got now, but until quite recently, I went down there every couple of years or if I was in the area I'd stop in ... anything that broadens peoples experience is good for them, provided it's not dangerous or bad in some way ... it was a salient point in my life, it was the second most salient experience I have ever had, the first was going through a bushfire as a young boy.

Yet for others who have attended on more than one occasion the impact appears profound. As one of the alumni participants who attended Cottage by the Sea in the 1960s noted:

> Well, the first thing I think about is the beach, but the next thing I think about is that it put me on a path. It focussed me on a path is how I would describe it, and I have lived along that path a lot of my life and it started – that path started at the Cottage and will probably ... the building – a very imposing looking building and as I'm walking through, I'm thinking, I remember a cupboard being there. I mean silly little things, but I remember a cupboard being there and it had all these clothes in it, and basically when I got there it was like you get to pick these nice clean, folded, ironed clothes kind of thing and I remember this massive cupboard, and it was silly really.



What is abundantly clear in these accounts is the enduring impact participation in these experiences have had on the memories of these individuals – impacts from experiences that would otherwise have been unlikely to have occurred without Cottage by the Sea. The place-based experiences in outdoor activities and marine and water-based adventures (e.g. swimming with seals, fishing in the bay, surfing) and community-based activities (e.g. visits to the marine discovery centre) are only a few examples of activities the participants referred to as impactful in creating affective memories of place. Teachers were particularly aware of this impact.

> *So, I think putting kids in challenging situations where they're supported is incredibly important to that growth – you want a kid to aspire to be more than what they see around them, you have to show them ... even down to a kid eating spinach that he might not otherwise eat, they're examples of challenges that show them the world is bigger than they think ... they are still talking about going up the tower in Queenscliff with a 360 degree view at the top, the marina, yes, they love that and learning about water ... that becomes part of who they are, they have been to Cottage and they have challenged themselves.*

Beyond the carefully curated activities and adventures provided through Cottage by the Sea programs was evidence of the ways in which participation in seemingly routine aspects of community living supported social learning for participants. While this concept was discussed earlier in Theme 2 from the perspectives of belonging and community, here we consider the ways in which these experiences built happy memories through activities that while on the surface appear to be somewhat routine and 'everyday' in nature for some participants were hugely impactful through the affective memories they developed. For example, the provision of



a constant supply of food and participation in communal meals gave vulnerable children and young people opportunities to learn alternative ways of engaging with food and of sharing meals. As one teacher commented:

> Yeah, even our grade 2s, they would cook with us, even just sitting at a table together and eating with a knife and fork, that sort of thing, they obviously eat a lot of takeaway, getting them to experience the food that the chef would cook, kids would all try it. It was amazing just to watch! They would all sit around, and have a conversation like a family, it just doesn't happen in a probably a lot of their worlds. There's a child in that group that said ... it feels like home.

Similarly, participants regularly commented on the ways in which sleeping in the dorm-style rooms provided yet another opportunity to develop an awareness of dispositions and skills important in everyday interactions as social beings, and to support them to live a good life beyond their time at the Cottage. The affective memories from this experience of living in a community where participants not only think about those that they share the space with but that also experience the emotions of having others think about them becomes a feature of the enduring nature of these memories. As one teacher commented:

> I had 11 girls in the room, and just nearly as many boys, but they had to share that space, they all had to be considerate of each other ... if you've only got four in a room there is only three other people that you have to think about, it is very different from having 10 other people in the room that you've got to think about, there was a lot of new social learning for them.



Just being with schoolmates for an extended time was also something the students found particularly enjoyable:

> Probably being able to, like, have all the girls in one room, because I'm friends with most of the girls and we could – it's kind of different being able to wake up and seeing your classmates, that was fun.
>
> Something I liked is because most camps you only have certain cabins, and you can only sleep with certain friends, but that one you could be with all your friends.
>
> It's like a whole class sleepover.





Participation in routine chores afforded another example of social and emotional learning, in this case developing resilience, as highlighted in one past participant's recollection of weeding the garden. In this account we see evidence of the ways in which everyday activities like 'chores' become a shared endeavour that create positive memories on the basis of the sense of achievement or personal learning for participants.

> The gardening, the weeding, that was a big thing. No one was excited to do it, because we had to pull out weeds all day and fill these bags, it was hard. But, by the end of it we were all laughing, sweating, happy ... I just remember that you learn so much resilience, we had a job to do, it took a lot of resilience just to get through that. And you can get through it, I learnt not to look at it as the whole job in front of me – oh my god, I need to do this, this and this. It was each step, look at what you need to do, and baby steps through it ... I didn't like doing the weeding, but it taught me.

In attempting to articulate the complex manifestation of place bonds developed by participants during their time at the Cottage, common to many participants' narratives was a strong sense of the ways in which certain emotions, such as happiness and joy (discussed in Theme 1), become key drivers here. As others point out, regardless of the learning environment in which participants engage, 'there still needs to be an attachment to place(s) for learning and social engagement to develop and persist over time' (Ehret & Hollett, 2016, p. 252).

Perhaps most profound across the data were examples where the experience at Cottage by the Sea enabled participants to (re)create positive experiences of place, particularly in circumstances where prior experiences had cast particular 'places' in negative ways. Inherent in the account below we see evidence of the ways in which the Cottage plays a critical role in facilitating experiences of healing, a concept discussed in the previous theme. As one teacher explained, for one boy in particular experiences at the beach were not something that their family pursued on account of a family member drowning several years prior.

> Even listening to one of the little boys that was here before and talking about his experience with the water, his uncle had passed away, had drowned and that's why he's scared of water ... previously he had just said he was scared of water, and we would ask why was that? What was the scary part of it? But he had never said it was because his uncle had drowned, until this conversation just now ... he just shared it, and the other kids in the group, how respectful were they? Like sorry to hear about that, it must have been very tough for you. But as he said, now he knows that water can be safe, I've got teachers there to support me, I understand how rips work, I know you have to swim between the red flags, and I feel like I can go to the water now ... He must have been shit scared to go in there, but he has now got it off his chest and his barrier has been broken, as he said, I now feel safe going into the water – that was the first time I ever heard that story.

Taken together the above discussion highlights the ways in which emotions and the affective responses of participants to various aspects of the Cottage by the Sea experience become instrumental in shaping, and on occasions re-shaping, experiences of place. Yet as Wood (2009, p. 122) argues, a key element to understanding how place bonds are retold through memories and recollections is acknowledgement of the significant role played by 'objects as contextual and specific to certain people, places and experiences'. We now turn our attention to a consideration of the ways in which participant recollections of specific artefacts are understood to contribute to this.

COTTAGE BY THE SEA FOSTERS BELONGING THROUGH RELATIONSHIPS: 'IT SHOWED ME THERE WERE PEOPLE OUT THERE WHO CARED, WHO ACTUALLY GAVE A DAMN'

While the concept of fostering belonging through relationships was discussed in Theme 2, here we consider the ways in which these relationships were central to creating happy memories for participants. In her work examining the ways in which various stakeholders contribute to support the life trajectories of young people, Edwards (2009) discussed the concept of 'relational agency'. She uses this to consider the ways in which key stakeholders involved in various learning activities relate to and understand the expertise of others, as enacted in the pursuit of common and shared goals to support young people's wellbeing. In their work focused on flexible learning programmes, Morgan et al. (2015, p. 1041) emphasise the importance of safe and supportive relationships that are 'proactive, rather than reactive' in their response to working with young people. They argue that 'being and becoming relational in this way of working with young people' is critical to breaking down hierarchical relationships that can constrain more productive ways of engaging.

Key here are the ways in which this 'reframing' of the ways in which participants relate to each other becomes implicated in created positive and enduring memories. Spread across our interviews are numerous examples of the ways in which stakeholders reflect on the impact that Cottage by the Sea staff, highly attuned to the needs of the young people they interact with, have had on participant connection to the Cottage through the memories they create. But perhaps even more pronounced are the ways in which these relationships, and the positive memories developed through them, have shaped future trajectories.

As one alumni participant reflected:

> I think it's the people, I mean, I wouldn't say they raised me, because they had me for four weeks a year, but they had so much to do with my upbringing and they were always such ... a comfortable thing and really actively tried to get to know you.

Another alumni participant who, now in her 60s, reflected on the impact of Cottage people and artefacts as a catalyst for creating memories:

> Long term, well it showed me that you know that there were people out there who cared, who actually gave a damn, and that there were people that the normal is to have three meals a day. Normal is to have clean clothes and normal is to not have a wash in the sink once a month. Normal is to not be alive with fleas, to be cleaned, and that's what it taught me.

Numerous participants spoke of the expertise of Cottage by the Sea staff in their ability to personalise experiences for students at their 'point of need', emphasising the importance of their capacity to adopt strengths-based approaches and pedagogies in their practices with young people experiencing vulnerability.



Importantly, the combination of being challenged through various activities while supported by positive relationships was considered to be central to enabling positive and happy memories of the experience to be created for participants. As one principal explained:

> The staff are amazing, they meet students at their point of need; there were some kids who knew how to swim, others that have never been to the beach before – when we went boogie boarding there were kids that were fairly terrified of water, they were so good at accommodating, not forcing them to do something they really didn't want to do, but they made sure that for each kid, they got their best experience possible. They understand the background of the kids.

Importantly, this expertise did not reside solely with program staff but was evident in many of the relational exchanges children and young people had with staff and volunteers at Cottage by the Sea. As another teacher explained:

> The chef changed last year; one of the kids really loved him, they wanted to get a photo with him when we left ... what was good about the chefs, well, all the cooks and kitchen staff, was they sort of took requests a little bit. The kids were like, we want hamburgers tonight, and they were happy to accommodate that where possible. I think it made them feel like they had a bit of a voice, and agency in deciding what they were eating – it wasn't just like, this is what you're getting, eat it! It made them feel even more special ...

Key to the concept of relational agency is how Cottage by the Sea staff employ skills to engage with, and support, the teachers that attend programs with the students. As another teacher commented, through the relationality of all being positioned as 'vulnerable' together and the affective memories of this through the supported risk-taking adventures inherent in particular outdoor activities, this became an important turning point in the staff–student relationships during the camp, changes that were prevalent in (re)framed relationships back at school. A teacher explains this in reflecting on their experience of surfing with the children:

> I'm like, it's too cold, I don't want to do it, but this time, yep, I'm going in and I think sharing that experience and going, 'Yeah it is cold, but I'm in here too', it allows you to sort of see eye to eye ... there is no hierarchy, we're in this together, we are doing it together ... you bond a bit more I guess.

COTTAGE BY THE SEA CULTIVATES HAPPY MEMORIES USING ARTEFACTS: 'IT WAS INCREDIBLE – I REMEMBER REALLY RANDOM THINGS A LOT MORE VIVIDLY'

While several studies have documented the ways in which memories become instrumental in people's relationship with artefacts collected during specific experiences, others explain that 'affective memory inscriptions upon ... artefacts serve as important markers of connection' (Cardoso et al., 2017, p. 79). Others argue that artefacts, or specific objects, 'embody memories for individuals reminding them of special times, people and places' (Goldthorpe, 2017, p. 1). Yet others explain, over time, objects collected during experiences 'can become familiar things that create emotional and physical responses which invoke past experiences ... These objects become a mediator of memories; they act like a mirror reflecting who we were and who we are' (Wood, 2009, p. 121). Cottage by the Sea has a long history or providing artefacts to children and young people.





As reported in *The Age* on 24 February 1949:

> Annual Picnic. A highlight of the Ministering Children's League's annual picnic at the Queenscliff Cottage-by-the-Sea yesterday was the presentation of a handmade quilt by the mayoress of Heidelberg (Mrs. H. T. Sparks).
> The quilt was made by members of the league's auxiliary in that suburb, and has their names embroidered on it.

Common to many of the participant narratives was the significant role those various artefacts played in creating happy memories of their time at Cottage by the Sea. As one teacher explains:

> They loved the fact that they ... each got a knitted teddy bear, a knitted pair of slippers and a big pair of gloves, a scarf and a beanie and a blanket. And those blankets got carted everywhere of an evening. So, if we were down in the games room, the blankets were in the games room, the beanies and if you have a look at photos the kids are in the beanies ... I think because someone had taken the time, we talked to them that these were knitted and donated for you and other children that came to Cottage, so they sort of went ... oh, these are for us, so we get to take them home, yes!

For many children and young people experiencing vulnerability, the opportunity to attend Cottage by the Sea and have access to everyday items they may have required enabled a sense of agency not easily accessible in other parts of their lives. Importantly, it was the trust, respect, and care that was bestowed on the participants through artefacts such as the 'open cupboard' that created the conditions to allow them to enact that agency. For example, one teacher said:

> Remembering the toothbrushes, the deodorant, the clothes, the beanie ... the jocks – yeah jocks! Kids will say, I remember what I got here, and I'm really grateful! I recall when I went last year with the older students, they had the cupboard just open and, some of the kids here, like two or three didn't bring enough pairs of undies, they didn't have a towel – there was never any judgement, like, if you didn't have that, you just went to the cupboard and you just got it. It just eliminated that whole having to talk to an adult about it, the shame ... As long as they were respectful and were not pulling everything out, they were able to just go and get a pair of socks, get undies, get whatever they needed.

In many of the discussions held with participants, the concept of 'food' became an important and enduring artefact in their collective memories for the affective memories it provoked. For some it may have been the first time they had tried a specific meal, and for others it was the sheer quantity of food available and the recognition that having three meals a day was a consistent feature of their stay at Cottage by the Sea. Some alumni noted:

> I don't remember exactly, but, and I remembered things like getting Nestle chocolate. Someone would bring in a ... bar of Nestle chocolate in sick bay, but it was ... whole widening of my experience. You know, we'd never had anything like that before.
>
> I must have gone one winter when it was freezing, so I remember, sounds so silly, but I remember the smell of soup ... I just remember the smell of soup and I walked into the cafeteria and thought, Jesus.



Increased exposure and access to everyday items through experiences facilitated by the Cottage also became regular reminders for participants of happier times long after they had left the camp. In the following account, one participant explains how memories can manifest in the senses of smell and taste through artefacts such as a lip balm.

> it was incredible, I remember really random things a lot more vividly, like the lip balm, Carmex. I used Carmex on [one of our camps] and, like, whenever I use it again, like, that smell and that task brings me back to that camp ... I can see the exact tent I was in, the activities – ferreting, fishing, just so much stuff ... and then we would cook up like the fish we caught, the yabbies, the rabbits and we got to eat them.

Inherent in many of the conversations relating to specific artefacts that became markers of participants' engagement with the Cottage is a recognition that a diverse range of artefacts impact young people in incredibly different ways. Almost always there was an affective response to these artefacts that contributed to participants' enduring memories. As discussed above, for some it was the enabling elements of being able to access an 'open cupboard' that engendered feelings of agency, respect, and care. For others it was the gratitude they felt on receipt of the knitted gifts or items such as a lip balm that created happy memories manifested in senses of taste and smell. As others explain, 'emotions can generate a strong impact upon memory ... considering that memory functions selectively, memories are recalled at the moment on experiences relevant, traumatizing, or pleasurable aspects and which produce meaning for the individual' (Cardoso et al., 2017, p. 81).



COTTAGE BY THE SEA CREATES AFFECTIVE MEMORIES THAT ENDURE AND ARE 'RELIVED' BEYOND TIME AT THE COTTAGE: 'I SAW LIVES CHANGE'

Some participants felt the Cottage by the Sea *Take a Break* program was likely to remain one of their best memories of school:

> Because there's just so many things that it's like the most memorable part of school year's is probably school camp. When you're older, you'll definitely be able to come back, and be, oh, I went to this camp, and I did this and this and this.

From another group of students in another school:

> it makes me, every time we think about our primary school friends, you would think of camp, Cottage by the Sea, and that would make you remember a bit more from when you were at camp and what the fun times you had when you were in primary school.

Perhaps most compelling across the interviews were recurrent conversations about the ways in which the emotions generated through particular experiences and relationships became attached to artefacts that enabled participants to recall the happy memories they had created at Cottage by the Sea. Importantly, for many participants, these artefacts became more than reminders in that they provided participants opportunities to relive these memories, becoming symbols of hope, gratitude, motivation, significant learning, and times of joy.

As one teacher explains:

> We did our graduation last night and we asked the grade 6s to go through all the photos from when they arrive at school, right through to now, and they put it together in a program called Photo Story and then make it into a movie. Cottage by the Sea photos they just come up in so many – well you've got a photo of them on the pier, the seal came up, all the little bits that came from Cottage, it shows they just thoroughly enjoy it, if you ask them, Cottage is the one they write about in report reflections, it was the thing that they enjoyed most this year!



In the examples below, past participants explain the significance of artefacts in enabling them to relive memories created. For some it was an object, yet for others it was capturing these experiences in digital artefacts that (re)produce positive affective memories.

> I still have my yellow bucket hat that says Cottage by the Sea on it and I still wear it all the time, it is a bit faded and worn now, but I love that hat.
>
> We used to get DVDs of each camp when we – yeah ... at the end of the year. So, just watching them back, just relives everything, every moment. And the playground – well everything's changed so much, but it's still the same, if that makes sense?
>
> it really did teach me that like life's not that bad ... And you create memories that actually do last a long time. For me to even remember what happened there, the good times I had, I could draw back on ... I kind of

> came up with this saying, like, worse things happen to better people ... as a child you just want happiness and hope to actually do and be and say what you want ... it's just nice that there are certain places and environments that can provide the tools to dream ... there are good people in this world that genuinely want to help others, regardless of who they are, what their status is.

In considering the enduring element of the impact of creating happy memories for participants through Cottage by the Sea engagement, one past principal explains:

> I saw lives changed; it was incredible what they did, what the children, when they came back from their experiences, and they never would have had those at all, any experience of, particularly surfing and wetsuits and surfboards and everything they provided like that ...

As discussed elsewhere in this report, evidencing the impact for specific individuals is challenging given it can be understood differently for individuals across different points in time and trajectories. As such, a key focus here has been on attempting to capture instances of change (in dispositions, thoughts, aspirations, confidence, resilience) and how stories are captured and told, recalled as lived experiences and relived through artefacts and mementoes. These became an important method in this work. As Foley (2022, p. 117) argues, impact is elusive at times: 'it emerges in an embodied response, a shiver or risen hackle, or emergent in body language, you sense it, as a meditative moment on a bicycle or surfboard, or sitting in warm sun ... equally it can be a challenging moment of danger and risk ... capturing those moments, both in and out of place, is hard to do, record or measure, but worth attempting'.

IN SUMMARY

The differences between the life children and young people experience at Cottage by the Sea and their everyday life can be stark. The Cottage works hard to create a memorable experience for everyone attending their programs, not only by providing fun and challenging activities but also in the mementoes given to the children and young people made by members of the community, such as clothing and handmade toys. These artefacts become ongoing symbols of their time in the program, with parents and children and young people alike often mentioning how treasured these items are. Our research showed the ongoing sense of connection to Cottage by the Sea these mementoes enabled and the effect these artefacts – such as 'the cupboard', 'the slide', 'the garden', and 'the beach' – had in reinforcing their sense of being welcomed, of belonging, and of the support they felt during their time in the program and beyond.



CONCLUSION: RIDING THE WAVES

The purpose of this research has been to seek to understand the medium- to long-term impact of Cottage by the Sea programs on the lives of participants. What became obvious from our interviews with all of those associated with the Cottage was the depth of affection everyone interviewed had for the organisation and its programs. Often this was displayed in remarkably moving and emotional responses, particularly from those who had a chance to fully process their involvement with the Cottage.

Alumni, stretching back decades, often considered their connection with Cottage by the Sea as life changing. It became one of the defining and most cherished memories of their childhood. The Cottage not only provided them with options they never considered possible before but also instilled in them a desire to give back – or rather, to pay forward – to the community they had been welcomed into.



Teachers and principals are very much aware of the opportunities Cottage by the Sea offers their students. These are not limited to the activities their students would otherwise be unable to access, but they also stressed the learning opportunities and resilience the Cottage makes available that would be hard to achieve without the concern and support provided to all participants, regardless of background, ability or the confidence and self belief the children enter the program with.

Parents were similarly effusive in their respect for the program and often noted the changes it had brought to their children, even after a short interaction with the Cottage. Some of these parents had also been alumni of Cottage by the Sea themselves and were in a position to compare their experience with that of their children. Others had witnessed older siblings who had also participated in the programs. It would be difficult to find a single negative comment across all the interviews we held with these parents.

The recent student attendees were interviewed in groups. Sometimes it proved difficult to transcribe these interviews. Suddenly, all the students would remember something they particularly liked about their time at Cottage by the Sea and in their excitement they would all speak at once, providing us with a cacophony of joy. Children learn so much from joy, and this was on full display even months after they had attended the Cottage. This is truly a tribute to the medium- to long-term impact the programs have had on their young lives.

Cottage by the Sea has a long history of providing programs that offer young people opportunities that have lasting effects on all those fortunate enough to enter this community. **The *ripples* we sought to uncover so often have become *waves* that have carried them throughout their lives.**



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