Creating virtual spaces for the formation of friendships involving children and youth with disabilities: A scoping review

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Background

Children and youth with disabilities experience a greater risk of **social isolation.**[1]

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Society has become **increasingly digital**; a trend sped up by COVID-19.

There is a need to focus **on how to design virtual spaces** that are optimally conducive to initiating and maintaining social connections for children and youth with disabilities.

Research Question

What strategies can inform the intentional design of, and access to, virtual spaces and experiences that afford opportunities to **form friendships** for children and youth with diverse disabilities?

Methods

A literature search of **4 databases** (Medline, Embase, Scopus, ERIC) was conducted following the Arksey and O'Malley's methodological framework for **scoping reviews.**[2] **10,419 records were identified** and screened by 3 researchers using a predetermined inclusion-exclusion criteria. A preliminary thematic analysis was conducted.

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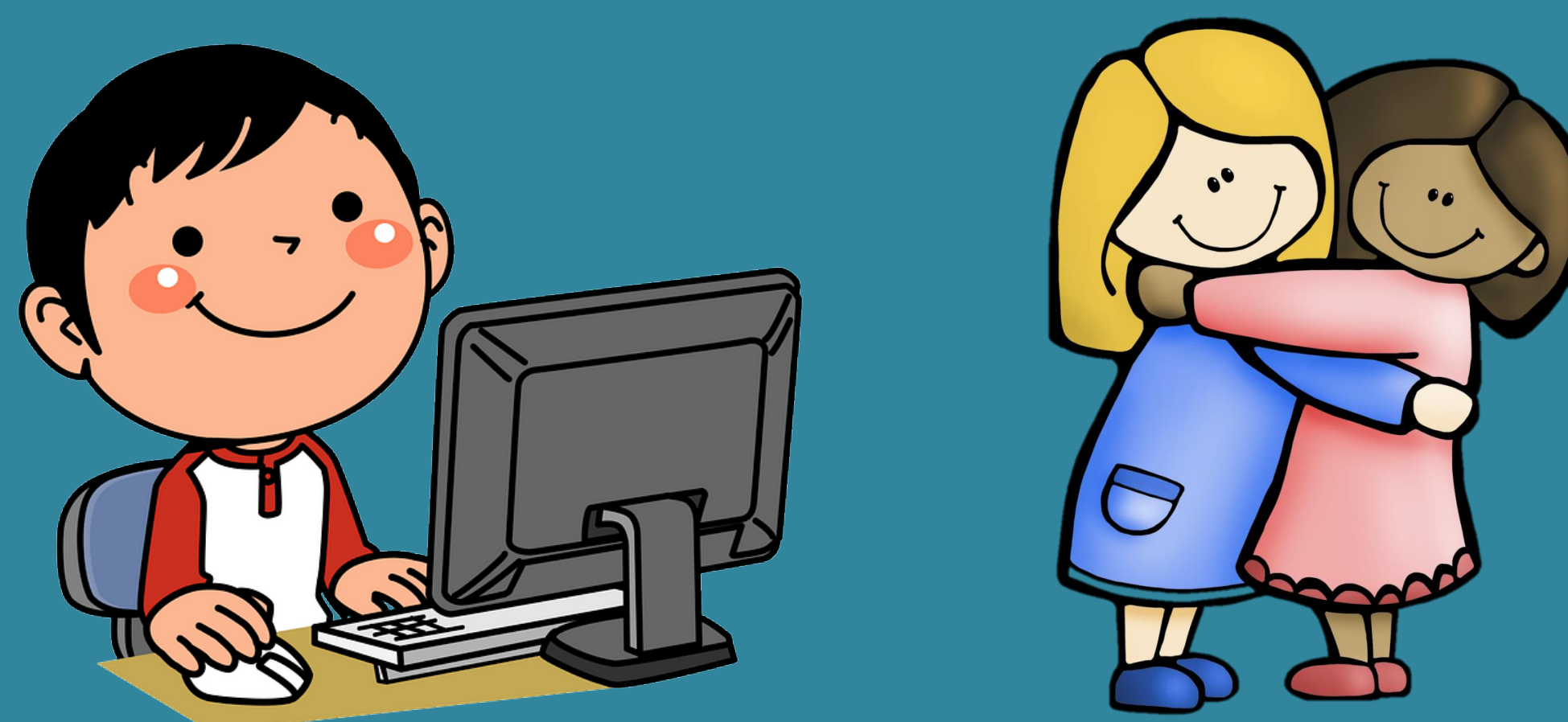
Preliminary Results

Data collection is ongoing. Virtual spaces range from gaming servers, message boards, chatrooms, and social networking sites. Findings suggest that elements contributing to greater social connection include

Opportunities for **peer mentoring**, as youth value interactions with peers who share chronic conditions and lived experiences

Incorporating **familiar or popular recreational components** to increase youth engagement (i.e. Minecraft)

Utilizing **moderators/facilitators** who can model positive behaviour, troubleshoot, and provide a sense of safety and order online

Conclusions

Virtual spaces provide unique and accessible opportunities to connect socially.

Interventions which incorporate peer mentorship, utilize moderators, and employ well-known recreational activities may be **optimal for virtual friendship formation and sustainability.**

Relevance

Social connection is a crucial aspect of a child's growth and development.[1] Virtual spaces **can remove geographic and environmental barriers** that persons with disabilities might otherwise encounter when making friends. This review may **guide service providers** on the design and access to online spaces which provide children opportunities to make meaningful friendships.

References

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