Virtual friendships and social engagement to combat social isolation in youth with disabilities during the COVID-19 pandemic

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Background

Staying socially connected using virtual platforms became part of a 'new norm' [1] during the COVID-19 pandemic.

For children and youth with disabilities, virtual interactions created new opportunities to remove barriers to forming connections and friendships.

Holland Bloorview's Transitions Strategy implemented a series of programs moving opportunities to meet and make friends from **physical spaces** into **virtual spaces**. Virtual Program Categories include:

Virtual Hangouts	Arts-Based Programs	Adapted PEERS®
• Opportunities for youth to connect through recreational activities	• Opportunities for youth mentors to express personal narratives about disability	• Social skills intervention for youth & caregivers

Objectives

1. Do the programs **meet participants' needs** to socialize/reduce isolation?

2. How **accessible, satisfactory, and socially educational** were programs?

3. What happens next to **maintain/improve programs**?

Methods

Youth, family members, and service providers completed qualitative interviews and mixed-methods surveys.

Preliminary themes and survey findings presented in an earlier poster. Updated qualitative findings presented in current poster.

Virtual programming remains a promising option for some youth with disabilities to experience social connection, both <u>during</u> and <u>after</u> COVID-19 lockdowns.

Youth "Making sure that you prioritize connecting with people, that was something that I really took out of this whole experience."

Family "The ability to have genuine connection and conversation in a virtual format, has... I think, the potential is much greater than I had originally thought it would be."

Service Provider "The room for [friendship] is there, it's just a matter of us, as facilitators, learning how to encourage that, how to make space for it, how to help navigate it... what can we figure out along the way."
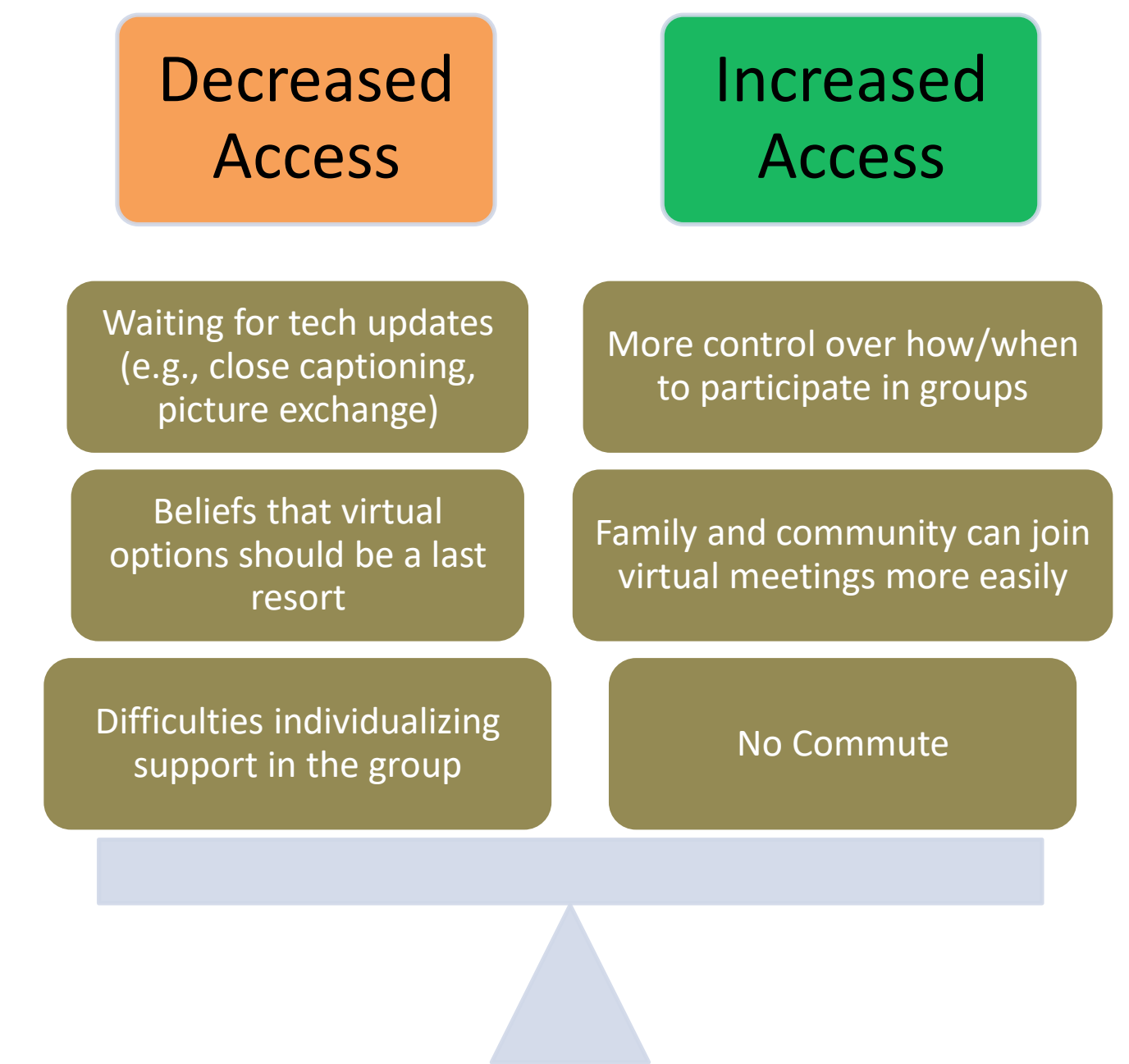
Results

Virtual programming changes the 'look' and 'feel' of social connection and belonging.
A meaningful friendship can include:
• Being invisible and silent (camera and microphone off)
• Conserving energy (not having to coordinate a commute and attendant care)
• Feeling safe to try new things in a familiar space (at home)

Access increased for some client groups and decreased for other client groups.
Multiple considerations influenced balancing needs:

Decreased Access	Increased Access
Waiting for tech updates (e.g., close captioning, picture exchange)	More control over how/when to participate in groups
Beliefs that virtual options should be a last resort	Family and community can join virtual meetings more easily
Difficulties individualizing support in the group	No Commute

Feedback on how virtual programs can continue.
Youth, families, and service providers shared their feedback on ways to continue programming:

Co-Design	
✓	Complete pre-meeting surveys and vote on what to do
✓	Share agenda and visuals before meetings to help prepare expectations
Hybrid Format	
✓	Schedule activities for youth to build rapport online and offline
✓	Add new roles to facilitating groups (e.g., tech support, mental health support)
Long-Term Connections	
✓	Add more virtual sessions over a longer period of time
✓	Put systems in place for youth to stay connected after groups end

Discussion

Participants in virtual programs spoke about being surprised by quality of connections. Service providers have a new opportunity to explore how to optimize this new virtual pathway to long-lasting friendship and belonging.

Reference: Rosenbaum, P. L., Silva, M., & Camden, C. (2021). Let's not go back to 'normal'! lessons from COVID-19 for professionals working in childhood disability. *Disability and Rehabilitation, 43*(7), 1022-1028.