Virtual programming remains a promising option for some youth with disabilities to experience social connection, both during and after 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.”

---

**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**: Opportunities for youth to connect through recreational activities
- **Arts-Based Programs**: Opportunities for youth mentors to express personal narratives about disability
- **Adapted PEERS**: 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.

---

**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**
  - Waiting for tech updates (e.g., close captioning, picture exchange)
  - Beliefs that virtual options should be a last resort
  - Difficulties individualizing support in the group

- **Increased Access**
  - More control over how/when to participate in groups
  - Family and community can join virtual meetings more easily
  - Beliefs that virtual options should be a first resort
  - No commute

**Feedback on how virtual programs can continue.**

Youth, families, and service providers shared their feedback on ways to continue programming:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Co-Design</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>✓ Complete pre-meeting surveys and vote on what to do</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>✓ Share agenda and visuals before meetings to help prepare expectations</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Hybrid Format</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>✓ Schedule activities for youth to build rapport online and offline</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>✓ Add new roles to facilitating groups (e.g., tech support, mental health support)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Long-Term Connections</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>✓ Add more virtual sessions over a longer period of time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>✓ Put systems in place for youth to stay connected after groups end</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

---

**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.