Participation of People with Disabilities in Online Groups and Activities

By David Hoff

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, day and employment service providers have had to quickly determine how best to provide supports for people they serve. For many this means transitioning to services and supports that can be provided remotely. This brief is one in a series developed to help community providers continue to provide services to those who are currently working, seeking employment, or engaged in community-based day supports.

During this time, we are all learning how to best support the people we serve. We welcome your feedback and ideas as we all work together to provide services that help people to continue to work towards their goals while staying safe and healthy.

**ICI COVID-19 resources:
covid19.communityinclusion.org**

Many people participate in a variety of online activities with others who have common interests. Examples include recreation, exercise, wellness groups, civic organizations, clubs, online classes, and advocacy groups. With the COVID-19 pandemic, this has only increased, including many activities that previously took place in person now moving online.

The strategies and tips in this brief are intended to help individuals with disabilities participate successfully in online activities, with a focus on live activities that individuals can participate in with others.

Identifying Activities

Start with goals and interests: A starting point in choosing online activities is to determine interests that the individual wants to explore and participate in. What are their goals? What activities do they enjoy? Are there new skills they want to develop? Are there hobbies they want to pursue? Are there people they want to spend time with who share a common interest?

Online participation as an option: In considering online activity options, consider the benefits, tradeoffs, and feasibility. These include:

▸ Will the online activity help the individual pursue their interests and goals?

▸ Is an equivalent in-person activity available in person in the local area, and is this a better option? Would an in-person activity allow for stronger participation, personal connections and relationships, and greater availability of natural supports?

▸ Does participating online allow for access to an activity that is not otherwise available?

▸ Can an online activity complement existing in-person activities (e.g., an online group can help provide support for working on a hobby at home)?

▸ Does the individual have or can they develop the skills and ability to participate online, with or without support?

Connect with existing activities: During the pandemic, individuals can outreach to in-person activities they previously participated in. What are the group's plans during the pandemic? Have activities moved online? If previous activities are not currently available, are there alternatives (e.g., a similar group in another community that is operating online)?

Exploring new activities: In addition to existing activities, an individual can consider new ones. Doing activities online allows the opportunity to easily explore interests and try out different things. And if a person finds that a new activity is not the right fit, they can quickly move on to something else.

Local vs. non-local activities: Start by considering activities that are local (e.g., a local environmental advocacy group, a local cooking class) as a way to develop friendships and relationships in the community that can be expanded on in person. At the same time, there are now more opportunities than ever to participate in activities online with people from outside the local area, in different parts of the state, all over the country, and around the world. Some individuals may find connecting with people who live

elsewhere to be interesting and enjoyable. And online friendships of people who rarely or never physically meet is not uncommon.

Finding activities: The best way to find activities is to conduct an online search, using specific criteria such as location, organization, and type of activity. Also check out the Temple Collaborative on Community Inclusion, which has a collection of resources on various activities: **Keeping Connected While Staying Apart.**

Individually driven: Individuals should be in the driver's seat when selecting online activities, possibly with help from others. Staff, family, and/ or housemates can help in doing online searches for activities, reviewing details, and helping the individual determine if the activity is something they want to sign up for or explore further. Any support being provided should be guided by the individual's choices and preferences.

Focus on non-disability-specific activities: In identifying activities online, just like activities in the community, focus on activities that are not disability-specific, as part of the goal of integration and inclusion. For example, instead of an online exercise group for "special people," individuals can participate in an online exercise class open to all. However, in some cases, activities specifically for people with disabilities make sense—for example, an online disability advocacy or support group.

Consider both one-time and ongoing activities: While participation in ongoing activities with others can be a great way to pursue interests and build relationships over time, also consider one-time activities such as conferences and presentations, particularly those that allow for interaction and discussion.

Qualifying for an activity: Some activities may be open to all and simply require signing up and logging in. Others may require some type of application process. Review any qualification requirements to ensure the individual meets them.

Free vs fees: While many activities online are free, others may have a fee to participate. Fully understand the fee structure and whether it is affordable for the individual. Considerations regarding fees can be a good learning opportunity in terms of finances and budgeting.

Screening activities: As with all activities online, ensure that activities are what they appear to be. Support the individual to screen activities, making sure they are legitimate and not some type of online scam.

Laying the Groundwork for Successful Participation in Online Activities

Technology needs: Having the necessary technology is important for effective online activity participation.

▶ What technology is needed to participate (smartphone, tablet, computer) and does the person have access to it?

▶ What technology features does the person need to participate (mic, camera)?

▶ What level of internet access does the person have, and is it sufficient? Do they have a high-speed connection, or a slower one?

▶ Does the individual have the ability to use the technology for the activity with or without support and accommodations?

If lack of sufficient internet access or technology is an issue, consider options for expanding access. Funding or equipment may be available from vocational rehabilitation and other disability agencies, and organizations that help bridge the digital divide (including those in the resource list at the end of this publication). **Social Security work incentives** (such as a PASS plan) may also be an option for funding.

Outreach to leaders of online activities: While it would be great to presume that individuals with significant disabilities can show up to online activities, will be fully welcome, and necessary supports will be easily provided, this may not be the case. Some support needs may need to be negotiated and arranged prior to the individual's participation. The person may want to reach out to the leader of the activity to discuss their participation, possibly with help from others (staff, family, etc.), to determine if the activity is appropriate and what kind of assistance may be needed to participate. As always, fully respect the privacy of the individual, and only disclose information about their disability with the person's permission.

Right to participate: If the activity is open to any member of the public, or if the individual meets any of the standard criteria for participating and is able to participate (with or without a reasonable accommodation/modification), the individual cannot be stopped from participating, as that would be a violation of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). In addition, the activity cannot have requirements for a participant with a disability that are not required of other participants, such as the availability of someone to help them.

Assistance and accommodations: The individual should determine if they will need any support or accommodations to participate. Examples include ensuring that information provided via text during the activity is also provided verbally, that the person can access information prior to the activity, or that technology assistance will be available. Under the ADA, the individual has the right to reasonable accommodations and modifications.

Participating in Online Activities

Prior to the activity: Discuss these guidelines with individuals to ensure they are well prepared.

- Be sure the person has anything they need ready ahead of time, including any supplies (e.g., for a knitting class, they'll need yarn and needles).
- Make sure they are in an area that is well lit so others can see them on video, and that their sound is working.
- Remind them to be in a place that is quiet and where they won't be disturbed.
- Practice with the various ways to participate—video, voice, chat, etc.
- Understand the rules for participating (following the leader's instructions, raising their hand when they wish to speak, etc.).
- Ensure they have any necessary links and passwords written down on paper, accessible on their phone, or somewhere else they can find them easily.

During the activity, the person should:

- Log in a few minutes early so they are ready to participate at the start time.
- Wait for their turn to speak and not talk over others. They should share their thoughts and ideas, but also give others a chance to speak.
- In addition to voice, consider using the text chat if available, as a way to interact.
- Mute audio when not speaking.
- Pay attention and be an active participant (contribute to the conversation, participate in breakout groups, etc.).
- Be respectful of others' opinions.
- If the activity is a support group, maintain confidentiality. In other words, what is said on the video call stays on the video call. The individual should not share personal things they learn about others outside the group.

Support during online activities: As individuals participate in activities online, staff, family, or housemates may play a support role. This role is to provide help, not be a participant. Remember the core principles of effective support: be present and intervene only as necessary, and facilitate natural supports.

Staying safe online: Make sure individuals follow these guidelines to protect their safety.

- Immediately leave an online meeting if they start to feel uncomfortable for any reason.
- Don't give people they meet online their personal information, including their address, phone number, or bank account number.
- Be careful of scams or websites that aren't what they seem. If they see pop-up messages asking them to click, they should ignore them or ask the activity leader if the message comes from them.
- Along the same lines, they should not click on any links in emails or messages unless they are sure the links are safe.
- Ask for help right away if they see anything they think might not be safe.

Keeping the right balance: Online activities with others can be a great way to pursue interests, learn, have fun, and build interests and friendships. However, the individual should be careful of spending too much time in online activities. It could become a problem if it gets to the point where they are no longer doing in-person activities at home and in the community. Whether during the pandemic or afterwards, the strongest relationships will likely be built with those they spend time with in person.

Examples of Online Activities

- Art and drawing lessons/groups
- Exercise, yoga, Pilates
- Meditation
- Wellness groups (e.g., support for anxiety, healthy eating)
- Cooking classes
- Book discussions
- Religious services
- Club meet-ups based on hobbies, personal interests
- Civic and service groups
- Attending public meetings online
- Self-advocacy groups
- Public speaking (e.g., Toastmasters)
- Political and advocacy groups
- Online courses
- Serving on a nonprofit board of directors, citizen advisory groups, and similar groups
- Live lectures, presentations, and conferences

RESISTANCE

RESOURCES

Technology organizations

▶ Tech Goes Home – Focused on bridging digital divide

▶ EveryoneOn – Help in finding low-cost internet and computer access

▶ AbilityNet – Focused on digital accessibility for individuals with disabilities

Computer training

▶ GCFLearnFree.Org - Wide variety of online computer training tutorials

▶ NorthStar Digital Literacy - Online training and assessments on technology

Staying Safe Online

▶ Internet and Mobile Device Safety Tips (Youth Organizing! Disabled & Proud)

▶ Online Safety and Social Media - Includes video on internet safety (ConnectAbility Canada)

▶ Staying Safe on Social Media and Online – Guide for download (Mental Health Foundation)

▶ Webinar: Staying Safe Online: Tips for Adults with Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities and Their Loved Ones - For professionals and families (Arc of NJ)

The online world is a vibrant place where many people enjoy satisfying contact with others who share passions, beliefs, hobbies, and lifestyles. It allows people to expand their social worlds to faraway people while also creating stronger connections to the place where they live. It helps many people find others who share their interests no matter how distant they are, and it also helps them increase their contact with groups and people they already know and feel more connected to them. Rather than replacing in-person activities, online activities complement them, and provide a level of access to activities and social networks that would not otherwise be available.

From Online Communities, by John B. Horrigan, Pew Research Center

www.communityinclusion.org | www.employmentfirstMA.org