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Navigating Virtual Services: Strategies for Supporting People with IDD

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COVID-19 has had a significant impact on our lives. There has been a reported increase in worries and fears, along with increased loneliness, isolation, and sadness. Our social circles have gotten smaller, our activities have been put on hold, and we are more worried about our future; collectively, we are experiencing increased levels of stress. This experience of change is no different for the individuals we support with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD). In this digital age, most of us have turned to technology to help us cope and stay connected. We have exchanged face-to-face interactions with virtual spaces.

For many, this virtual space has helped us to stay connected and to regain a sense of belonging. It has become a tool that can help us manage stress and feelings of loneliness. It has supported our mental health and allowed us to continue to feel like a part of our communities in an unprecedented time.

Recent reports have confirmed that individuals with IDD experience greater feelings of isolation and loneliness. COVID-19 has amplified these feelings. Many individuals we support face additional barriers and challenges when it comes to accessing technology and digital spaces. The goal of this article is to address these obstacles to help individuals with IDD access and connect within virtual spaces. The following recommendations are outlined to assist you and the individuals you support to participate in the virtual world safely.

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Personal biases

Confusing the need for assistance with inability. Often, we hear individuals with IDD are not interested in online programs or that they will not benefit from two-dimensional interactions. Question your own preconceptions and try regardless of your assumption. Do a trial run and work through some of the barriers you may be experiencing by reaching out for assistance. You may want to talk to someone about exploring the need for assistive device options as well.



Consent

Assess the individual's knowledge and awareness of the virtual program they will be attending. Discuss the pros and cons of being online and provide internet safety awareness when needed. Attending an online program has different risks involved in it than traditional face-to-face programs. Provide information in plain language to the individual and answer any questions concerning the program and their online presence.

Education around internet safety such as awareness around the risk of sharing personal information online can increase protection measures for the individual participating.

Equipment

Individuals with IDD tend to have less access to cell phones or other electronic devices. Addressing access to technology and determining whether the individual has internet access should be addressed first.

When an individual is accessing video platforms, it is essential that the camera the individual uses is positioned appropriately. Place the lens of the camera in a range where the chest to top of one's head is visible and where others can positively see them. Lighting is also necessary to think about. For instance, can they be seen by others, and can they see the screen without glare? When a window is behind the individual that is on camera, there can be a glare from the sunlight, which makes it harder for others to see the individual.

Accessibility

Do you need to make the font or screen images larger or increase the size of the mouse icon? Would turning text to speech on mean more independence. Knowing quick tips and tricks on how to make electronics accessible is vital in supporting online programming. Again, reach out to the appropriate person if assistive devices or non-traditional use of technology is needed for the individual to be able to access the virtual program successfully.

Environment

The environmental space that the individual is in when they connect online needs to be appropriate in terms of physical boundaries. For instance, avoid connecting online while sitting on a bed or displaying the bed in the background. Remind the individual you are supporting to use a safe and comfortable space others will see in the video as well. So, shift the desk or camera around to access a more private location. If space or accessibility is an issue and using space such as a bedroom is the only available option, then be aware of the background options to protect privacy. The privacy of the individuals you are supporting is a priority.

When shared environments such as group homes are being used to join online programming, it is crucial to be aware of conversations and activities occurring in the background. Everyone's privacy is essential and being aware of who is seen and what is heard online is just as critical. For example, remain aware of people engaging in household chores, like folding laundry or discussing topics in the background when others are participating in online programs.

Dress the part

Just as you would have supported someone to prepare for their day attending a day program, volunteer position, or community drop-in program, it continues to be essential to prepare for time spent online. Being fully dressed, appropriately groomed, and ready to participate helps to increase self-esteem. It also helps to maintain one's routine during these changing times. Teaching these skills is an essential new daily living skill, and having a checklist, or a breakdown of steps such as a task list or a social story can help establish these new routines, which in turn increases structure.

Preparation and support

Knowing which activities the individual you support will be participating in ahead of time will help organize and prepare the supplies that may be needed. Determining which supports are needed from staff will also be helpful for a smooth participation.

An example of support that may be needed from staff is assisting with putting a person on mute. Examine whether the individual requires your support throughout the online program or just to get them started. Knowing that staff are present and aware of when support is needed is another great way to assist with successful participation.

Teaching online skills

Transitions can be difficult for people with IDD in regular programming; transitioning in online programming can be even more challenging. It is difficult to pick up or be able to observe someone's non-verbal body language when participating online. Asking the facilitator or others participating in the online program a direct question to address any doubts, concerns, or questions you may have will be part of the skill-building process.

Furthermore, computer and online skills are new to a lot of the people we support, but many people are adapting very quickly. Once a skill is taught, give time and space for the person you support to attempt to learn and practice what has been taught. Be available to help but do not assume they need you.

Strategy: Use visual cues or social stories to assist an individual with IDD you are supporting to better understand the technology they are using and to act as an aid in practicing.

Online etiquette

Just as technology is diverse, so too are the people who use it. Communication styles differ across cultures; thus, ensuring we are respectful to everyone is critical. Different types of online formats require different types of etiquette or ways to be respectful to others as well.

The tone of one's voice or certain jokes (especially when it is difficult to read nonverbal body language) can be easily misunderstood over an online platform.

When you type in uppercase letters, often, people read this as someone yelling at them.

Saying "hello" and "good-bye," and introducing yourself is still very important and often forgotten online.

If you are not talking, put yourself on mute. This helps reduce background noise when too many people are not muted.

Allow those speaking to have their turn by not interrupting someone while they are saying something.

Arrive on time or a few minutes early, respecting the facilitator and the other participants' time and allowing you the opportunity to introduce yourself and others as needed.

Dress appropriately. Dress as you would when you are going into the community or to the movies with a friend. Avoid the use of robes or other clothing that you would not wear into the community. Low-cut shirts are not recommended as camera angles can highlight how the shirt is cut and creates an uncomfortable situation for all participating.

Be aware of your surroundings in your environment and any distractions or increased noise. Is there music playing in the background? Is the TV on? Is your housemate having a conversation near you? Is there a DSP or family member preparing lunch in the kitchen? Too many noises can make it difficult for others to hear each other and the facilitator.

Follow-up

Encourage discussion about online programming the same as you would when returning home from a community activity, workplace, or day program. Ask questions and find out what the person you are supporting enjoyed or learned. This will help to bring that learning further into their lives and encourage similar options to choose from in the future.

Encourage communication with the online facilitators. This communication may be different than DSPs had previously; however, it is helpful to communicate the support needs of the people being supported. Any major changes or support needs that are relevant to share (with the individual's consent) may be helpful for the online facilitator to be aware of for increased success in the program.

Take-Away Strategies

Key Strategies to Great DSP Online Support

1. Support and teach boundaries, privacy, and the law.
2. Encourage new daily routines with social stories, checklists, or task analysis.
3. Maintain good communication with online facilitators – what is working and what is not for the people you support.
4. Be prepared to support but do not assume your help is needed.
5. Model appropriate online social skills in front of the people you support.
6. Provide internet safety education and online training skills.
7. Respect online etiquette and teach these skills.
8. Learn ways to make electronics more accessible for the people you support. Review whether there is a need for assistive devices or advanced technology around accessibility.
9. Use plain language to teach about consent in joining online programs.

- 1) TIP: Use a visual calendar to help you remember. Promote participation in online programs to decrease isolation. Tips on joining a virtual online session can be accessed online. Set a reminder for the date and time of the online session.



- 2) Dress the part! TIP: Pre-plan your outfit the day before or that morning. What would you wear when going out into the community, or to the movies with a friend?



- 3) Eliminate Distractions. TIP: Pre-plan where in your house you will be participating in an online session. Before your session, is there music playing in the background? Is the TV on? Are you close to the kitchen where others may be making lunch or using the kitchen? Your surroundings must be quiet so others can hear you, and you can listen to others.



- 4) Respect other participants. TIP: Don't interrupt others when they are speaking. Wait your turn to share your ideas or thoughts!



- 5) Ask for help when you need it. TIP: Ask your DSP/family member, or facilitator for help when you need it.



About the authors

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