Virtual 4-H Program Guidelines

Virtual 4-H programs offer new opportunities to connect with 4-H families and engage new audiences. Whether the virtual programs are club meetings, conferences, camps, workshops, exchanges, showcases, or other formats, these programs can be valuable tools to help youth grow into competent, caring, and contributing members of society.

This resource provides guidance for creating safe spaces and applying the Code of Conduct and the 4-H Thriving Model to these innovative programs. Throughout this guide, you will find youth protection strategies, best practices, and resources to promote positive youth development and a sense of belonging within virtual platforms.

Planning the Program

Required Supervision

- Ensure that a minimum of two enrolled Cornell Cooperative Extension (CCE) 4-H adult volunteers are in place for virtual or conference call 4-H programs and are connected prior to members arriving and after all youth sign off. (If two cannot be present, one 4-H adult volunteer and another adult at least 21 years old or staff must participate).

    o One volunteer will lead the program while the second volunteer can monitor the chat, help with internet connectivity, mute a program participant, monitor participants' body language and emotions, or stop the program if needed, especially if something inappropriate is shared.
    Note: If something inappropriate is shared, the 4-H volunteer/staff is encouraged to complete an incident report (F.O.R.M. Code 1501) and report the incident to their supervisor.

- Youth leaders may host virtual or conference call 4-H programs as long as staff or enrolled volunteers are present with co-hosting capabilities. Before the program, youth and adult leaders must agree to a clear agenda and specific safety precautions.

- When using breakout rooms, at least one enrolled CCE 4-H volunteer must be present in each room for the entire duration of the activity. (If enrolled volunteers cannot be present, another adult at least 21 years old or staff must participate). Remember that adults should never meet one-on-one with youth, even in a virtual session.

- Family units (i.e. youth with their siblings or relatives) may be in breakout rooms without CCE 4-H volunteers or adults as long as there is written permission from parents/guardians prior to the program.

Parental Involvement

- Parents should be encouraged to attend virtual programs if they would be expected to do so for in-person programs.

- If a youth intends to join without their parent/guardian present, make sure that you have written permission from a parent/guardian before the program (email, text, etc.).

Agenda & Length of Meetings

- Before planning a meeting, consider if the meeting is necessary. Could the meeting wait until everyone is able to meet in person? Does the virtual format have the utility and effectiveness to meet a need?

- If yes, be aware that virtual meetings are generally shorter than in-person meetings. They are most effective when agendas are clear and the meeting is limited and structured to focus on agenda items. If your meeting will be longer than one hour, break up the structure into segments with clear timelines to help online participants maintain focus. Consider how you can incorporate interactive components, physical activity, or mindfulness breaks to break up longer gatherings.

- Prepare an agenda with clear objectives and timelines, and share it with your participants in advance of the meeting.

- Make sure to start and end the meeting in a timely manner. Reserve time for admitting people from the virtual waiting room, and include a check-in or short team-building activity.

- Utilize registration features on virtual platforms. Not only does registration monitor attendance, it can also help you organize breakout rooms beforehand, which can minimize setbacks and save time during the meeting.

- Consider having hosts join the video call early and plan to stay after the meeting agenda is finished. Hosts can be ready to welcome people who arrive early or stay in conversation with those who have follow up questions. This can help foster a sense of belonging.

Inclusivity and Audience Needs

- Share meeting documents with participants ahead of time in their preferred format (e-mail, mail, shared online folder, etc.).

- Help to make sure everyone has access to the technology needed to join (computer or phone, internet connection, camera and microphone for their computer, etc.). If they do not, how will you continue to include them? For example, if someone has to join by phone, you may need to adjust how you refer to documents or resources. Reach out to your local 4-H office to see if there are resources we can provide to help.

• Will certain participants need accommodations or extra help to be able to join virtually? Do any of them need to do a test run? Have their parents/guardians had a chance to ask for this and to help you with this?

• Plan ahead to ensure youth who participate in the program feel welcomed and included - this can be hard in an online format. See 'Running a Program' section below for some tips and ideas for creating a sense of belonging online.

Setting Up and Scheduling the Program

Connection Options

•Currently, Cornell IT supports two web conferencing platforms: Zoom and Skype for Business (Skype - Windows and Skype - Mac). Zoom is better suited for scheduled events and training sessions, while Skype is very strong for ad-hoc or on-the-fly communications.

• If you want to use a different application (e.g., FaceTime, Facebook Messenger Rooms, Google Hangouts, Skype etc.) please be sure to have it approved by your local 4-H Office prior to its use.

Setting Up Your Virtual Connection for Privacy and Supervision

• Check that you have a good connection/bandwidth. If using wireless internet, for example, you may find that the connection is stronger in certain areas versus others.

• Set an access password to help ensure privacy and disable the 'join before host' option.

• Use only "group chat" and turn off "private chat."

• Turn off "screen sharing" for participants and make sure you know how to remove disruptive participants if you need to. You can give people permission to share during the program, if it becomes necessary to do so for activities.

• Do a test run or join early so you can test/troubleshoot audio/video and become familiar with meeting features like: mute & unmute, remove participant, raise hand feature, video on & off features, chat box, and breakout rooms. Participants see menus and options differently than meeting hosts. It can be helpful to practice with others ahead of time to explore how the experience is different for the different roles.

• For help setting up your virtual meeting in Zoom, go to the Zoom Help Center.

• Use the following links for information regarding other platform options:
  o Skype
  o Facebook Messenger Rooms
  o Google Hangouts

Backgrounds

- Be aware of your background. When possible, consider a neutral or blank wall, or consider hanging a solid-colored cloth or blanket behind you.

- Take time to consider what youth and other adults may see in your background from your personal life.

- Invite youth to explore virtual backgrounds. Participants may feel more comfortable with their videos on if they do not have to show their home or location.

- Allow youth to determine their own comfort level regarding videos. Make it clear that participants are not required to turn on their video, and that there will be no shaming behavior or coercion to see their backgrounds or likenesses.

Communicate Connection Information and Time

- If NYS 4-H Permission Slips or Enrollment Forms are collected for participants, make sure to follow the stated communication methods approved by parents/guardians. If forms are not collected, ask for the preferred communication methods on program registration, especially related to direct communication with youth, and follow the approved methods.

- Only share the link to the program with intended participants and/or their adult parents/ guardians in a closed setting such as text, email, or private social media group.

- Share connection information with your local 4-H Office.

Running the Program

- Follow the NYS 4-H Minor's Name and Image Policy. Do not screen shot or record participants' images, information or contributions during the program unless you have a signed Photo and Image Release Form in the current year for each participant. Explicitly state whether the program will be recorded prior to the meeting and obtain consent.

- As with any meeting: if formal business is being conducted, designate someone to take minutes and share with all group members after the connection is over. You may want to save the meeting chat to help with this or consider using a shared document (like a Google doc) for everyone to add information to during the meeting.

- Keep regular attendance records, as you would normally do, at all 4-H club and project meetings.

- Encourage everyone to edit their name on the participant list to what they preferred to be called and invite them to include their pronouns, too.

- Welcome everyone by name as they enter the meeting. For proper name pronunciation, make sure each person introduces themselves at the first meeting, and then welcome them by name in subsequent sessions (if program is ongoing).

- Establish group norms for behavior including preferred communication methods. How do participants join the conversation – voice, chat, raise their hands?

- If there is a lot of noise, consider having participants mute unless speaking and if there are bandwidth issues, consider turning off cameras.

- Make time for fun. Offer an icebreaker activity that allows kids to share in a variety of ways- verbally, visually and/or in the chat. Encourage people to bring a favorite drink or snack.

- Teach use of virtual platform features as you use them- where to find microphone, video, hand raise, chat feature, etc. Encourage participants to share their expertise and help each other troubleshoot as needed.

- Spend time on personal conversation, checking in on how people are feeling and where they are at that time. When dealing with sensitive topics please be clear to invite professionals to join the call and be open to helping during and after the call.

- Youth participants should attend virtual connections from their own home and not congregate with others for the virtual program.

- Please work with your County 4-H Office for virtual or conference call 4-H programs or if you have any questions.