

# Friendship and social connection online: The experiences of children and youth with disabilities

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## RATIONALE

- Children and youth with disabilities experience greater social isolation and are thus at greater risk of experiencing mental health concerns (Kwan et al., 2020)
- The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the potential of virtual spaces for fostering social connection, and how they could be used even beyond the pandemic
- Online platforms may provide an alternative avenue for social connection for children and youth with disabilities

## RESEARCH QUESTION

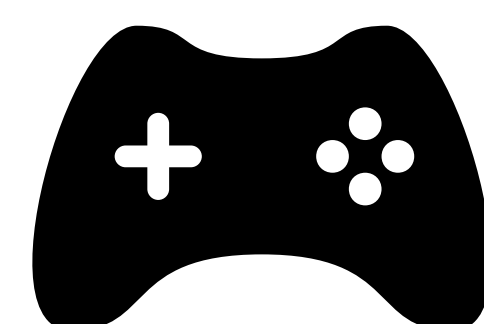
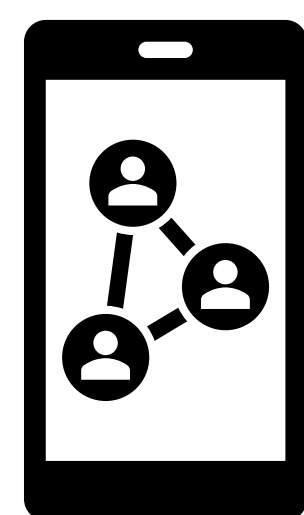
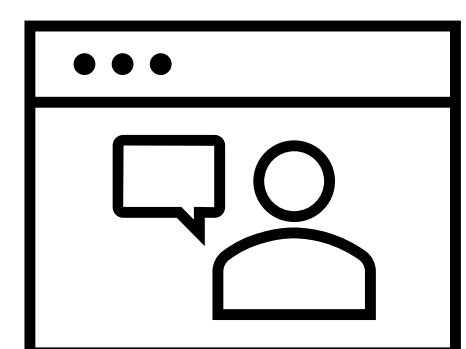
What does the literature say regarding the experiences and perspectives of children and youth with disabilities who use online platforms to connect socially and form friendships?

## METHODS

A literature search of four databases (Medline, Embase, Scopus, ERIC) was conducted in June 2021 and 10,419 records were identified for screening. Studies were screened by two researchers using predetermined inclusion criteria and a thematic analysis of selected studies was conducted.

Studies had to meet the following inclusion criteria:

- Participants were between the ages 4 and 24
- Participants had a motor, intellectual, and/or developmental disability
- The study was published in English
- Participants were asked about their social experiences with similar-age peers while using online platforms



Virtual platforms such as social media, online multiplayer games, and chatting platforms provide children and youth with disabilities with opportunities to form meaningful friendships, build interpersonal skills, and avoid bullying.

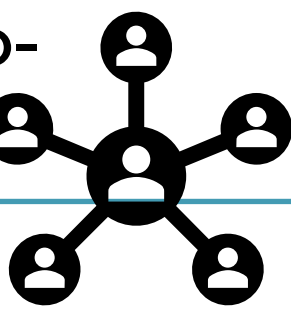


## RESULTS

Data collection and analysis is ongoing. To date, 7 studies have met exclusion criteria. Emerging themes are described below:

### Form and maintain friendships

- Participants described being able to form long-term, intimate friendships using virtual platforms, as well as maintain existing relationships formed face-to-face

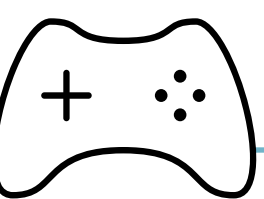


### Comfort with social interaction

- Participants described being able to be themselves and being able to avoid anxiety associated with social interaction

### Potential for skill acquisition

- Participants described learning new social, emotional, and cognitive skills that translated to real-life contexts

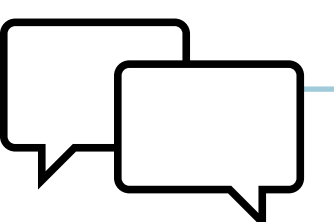


### Escaping social norms

- Participants described not being constrained by social norms (e.g., non-verbal cues, eye-contact, outfit choices) that they felt would otherwise restrict their ability to form relationships in person

### Control over social interaction

- Participants described the benefits of being able to choose who to interact with, when to interact, and how to interact socially



## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

These findings highlight the potential of online spaces for fostering friendship among children and youth with disabilities. The results of this review can be used to inform programming designed to promote social connection for patients at Holland Bloorview. Post-pandemic, virtual social interventions will remain relevant and beneficial, especially for families who experience barriers to accessing in-person programming.

## REFERENCES

Kwan, C., Gitimoghaddam, M., & Collet, J. P. (2020). Effects of social isolation and loneliness in children with neurodevelopmental disabilities: A scoping review. *Brain Sciences*, 10(11), 786. <https://doi.org/10.3390/brainsci10110786>