Views from VanDeWalle
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Keeping Youth Safe in a Virtual Environment

Since early 2020 our world has changed greatly. You may find yourself reaching out to engage with youth virtually more than you ever thought you would. As many of you enter the world of online learning and meetings it is important to consider the safety and security of your participants. Remember to consider virtual programming in the same lens that you would for in-person programming. It is just as important to make participants feel safe and inclusive as they did when meeting in person.

As you prepare for your virtual learning experience think about the following.
- Use passwords and/or waiting rooms to protect from unwanted participants.
- No one-on-one interactions. Have a second adult managing or participating in the virtual experience.
- Notify parents that you will be using virtual platforms to connect with their child.
- Keep conversational, professional, and focused on educational or meeting purposes.
- Make sure your background is appropriate for audience.
- Watch for outside party connections and be prepared to remove or close out of learning experience, i.e. hackers, unintended participants
- Be aware of online capabilities of your club members. Do they ALL have access to technology? Do they know how to use technology safely?
- Do not make video a requirement. Parents/Guardians may not be comfortable allowing video conferencing.
- Create some ground rules for usage and participation in virtual environments.

It is also a good idea to remind participants how they can keep themselves safe.
- Do not provide identifiable details such as address, school, full names.
- Remind that photos and videos shared online always have the potential for becoming a permanent part of history.
- Never share passwords or links to join virtual experience with others.
- Do not respond to messages that make you feel bullied, threatened, or uncomfortable.
- Never post or say anything that could hurt others.
- Be careful of what you are showing in the background that might identify where you are. This is especially important if meeting with people you may not
- know.

It is just as important to keep a safe online learning environment as it is to keep youth engaged by creating educational, active, and fun learning experiences.

(This article was written by Kimberly Cook, Nebraska Extension Educator.)