

A guide to setting up online social and support groups for LGBTQIA+ young people

This resource is a supplement to our existing resource:

Guidelines for Establishing Youth Groups

Available to download from:

rainbownetwork.com.au/resources

Online groups, now and in the future

During the COVID-19 Pandemic there was an urgent need to establish online support services, including social and support groups for LGBTQIA+ young people, and to increase accessibility and engagement with preexisting online and telephone services. We see an ongoing role for this kind of support alongside face-to-face options where possible. This guide aims to outline some key considerations in setting up online groups to ensure they are safe, accessible and well attended.

If you have found the transition to working in an online environment challenging so far and struggled with a lack of engagement from young people in online groups, you are not alone. We hope this guide can be of assistance.

While online groups bring their own set of challenges, they also have benefits. Restrictions on face-to-face meetings are easing, but there continues to be a place for online groups. The fact that they can run when physical venues are not available, the flexibility they afford in terms of geographical location of participants as well as the accessibility for young people with a disability are among the some of the benefits.

Setting up your group

Location

When setting up a group you will be designing it to suit a particular target group, however in the online space you have the option to create a group which is not place-based or to connect with other groups in other regions. Consider whether the purpose of your group is to create or build on a place-based community or to connect young people with a wider community. Young people in regional or rural areas can be very isolated and can really benefit from being a part of an online group, so where possible, share the details of your group with regional service providers.

Platform

Depending on the purpose and structure of your group you will need to determine the appropriate platform to use. Security, functionality, accessibility, internet requirements and flexibility such as break-out rooms are all factors to keep in mind.

Zoom and Facebook are two widely used platforms which are easy to access.

If you are considering using Zoom, this article outlines recommended Zoom security controls:

<https://www.mcgrathnicol.com/insight/recommended-zoom-security-controls/>

If you run a Facebook group, ensure that it is a closed group and that only your verified participants can attend.

This guide to Social Media from Minus18 has contains information about running Facebook groups:

<https://www.minus18.org.au/resources/safe-and-strong--an-lgbtq+-guide-to-social-media>

Minus18 conducted a survey of 244 young people when they put together their 'Digital Youth Events Toolkit'. This document contains lots of great ideas and also outlines the platforms with the most audience engagement and the pros and cons of various platforms. You can download the guide here: <https://www.minus18.org.au/resources/minus18-digital-events-guide>

Induction

Does your group require an induction process? Consider how you will bring young people into a group if you have not met them before and how this will differ from setting up a group based on preexisting relationships. Would your group serve the participants best as a closed group comprised of current members, as a broader group connecting with new young people or would you be better off offering one-on-one support?

If you are bringing new people into an online group, you may want to conduct an intake interview and share a group agreement with them in which the expectations and boundaries of the group are discussed.

Facilitation

What is the ideal ratio of well-being and support workers to young people in your group? It will depend on the resources available within your organisation but having at least one other person on your team as support staff, to be there for one-on-one communication if a young person is distressed, or to monitor the chat function (if there is one) can be very beneficial.

Risk assessment

Review your organisation's code of conduct and update it to ensure that it addresses the new issues that may arise in an online environment. Share the code of conduct with young people, and their parent's if they are involved. Include the contact details of someone who can be reached if the young person is feeling unsafe in the group.

Be clear about when you are available to provide online support and when you are not and consider how you will monitor online engagement outside of session times. Provide young people with clear advice about where they can access online support outside of session times.

Think about providing some online safety tips to the young people in your group by running a session addressing issue such as cyber safety, bullying, grooming, scams and phishing. This page from the eSafety commissioner outlines key safety issues that can arise for young people online: <https://www.esafety.gov.au/young-people>



For additional resources relating to creating safe online environments, you can download this 'Toolkit for Schools' created by the eSafety Commissioner.

<https://www.esafety.gov.au/educators/toolkit-schools>

Ensure the reporting process is clear within your organisation, should you witness or observe a childsafe/family violence incident during an online session.

Mixed age groups

Depending on the numbers of young people you have accessing your group/s, you may need to combine young people who are over 18 and with young people who are under 18. This poses some safety concerns which you will need to keep in mind.

Some strategies to ensure your group is a safe space for everyone include:

- Consider requesting that young people aged 18-25 obtain a Working With Children Check (WWCC) prior to participating. These are free for volunteers in Victoria.
- Include a component in your induction process where you discuss age appropriate behaviour.
- You could include rules around age appropriate behaviour as part of your group rules/code of conduct.
- If your group structure involves any unmonitored space, such as break out rooms, ensure these are split into age groups and have facilitators checking in on them regularly.
- Depending on the participants, you may want to hand some responsibility over to the older people set a good example and be peer leaders for the younger people in the group.

Barriers to access

Technology

Accessing online groups brings up new challenges. Some of the potential barriers to access for young people will be related to access to devices, adequate reception and data. Consider what support your organisation can provide to help young people with cost and access to data or devices. Can your unspent catering or venue hire budget be re-directed?

Confidentiality

Some young people live with others who do not know about their gender, sexuality or intersex variation. Online groups can pose risks to people who may not be 'out' to others in their household if those people overhear conversations or have access to browser history.

There are several things you can do to make sure that a young person's confidentiality is maintained. Some suggestions include:

- Contact young people individually before a meeting and ask them if there are any confidentiality or privacy issues that they would like to discuss.
- Consider making online groups not overtly LGBTQIA+ in the title of the group and the visual branding. For example, you could choose not to use the rainbow flag and to call it a 'wellbeing group'.
- Facebook closed groups, or other text-based groups can allow for more anonymity than video platforms.
- Consider including a text only chat in your group which participants can access at any time when it suits them. If you do this, make sure you have professional boundaries around when you are contactable and can engage with these chats. There are also safety concerns to keep in mind with any unmonitored chat.

Participant safety and online etiquette

Group safety strategies

Some guidelines around group safety which may apply to your group:

- Young people should preferably only be logged into the online space for the duration of the group so it can't be used as an unsupervised forum for communication and engagement.
- Anything that may allow others to identify the young person or their location should be removed, e.g. school uniform.

Creating a safe space

In online spaces, young people will not see the physical signals you would normally use to help them feel safe and welcome, such as posters, pride flags, brochures or bathroom signs.

Some ways to address this in online spaces with video could be to wear a pride lanyard or pronoun badge or use one of our Rainbow Network virtual back grounds.

[Find them HERE](#)

Keep in mind, some young people may be accessing your group from a home computer and may not be out to their family so be careful of overt Rainbow branding.

Fear of being mis-gendered can be a barrier to service access. It can be harder to establish someone's gender and pronouns without physical cues. Offer to share your pronouns and invite participants to share theirs if they feel comfortable doing so.

Rapport is important when young people are feeling isolated, and can feel challenging to build online, so take the time to create connections.

Creating an inclusive space

Think about what you can do to make your online space as inclusive as possible. Some points to consider:

- How can you best create a space for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and People of Colour to feel safe and have their voices heard?
- Ensure you begin every event with an acknowledgment of country (or a welcome to country by an indigenous person) and give the group participants an opportunity to reflect on the history and culture of the traditional landowners.
- Respect the choice some LGBTQIA+ young people make not to 'come out'.
- Include rural and regional participants where possible.
- Be inclusive of all participants by only using accessible resources or materials, or by providing anything they need to participate in workshops or activities.
- Online groups require more structure than face-to-face groups. Build structure into your program that ensures all the young people have a chance to participate and the online space is not just dominated by extroverts or awkward silences!
- Consider ways to make your group inclusive of deaf/hard of hearing and vision impaired/blind young people.

Group agreements and etiquette

Group agreements will differ from face-to-face groups and will need to be tailored to suit each group. Would it work best to have one preprepared which you share with participants before they join the group, or would it be better to include the group in creating the agreement?

Some examples of expected behaviour and etiquette in an online session:

- Adhere to the agreed ways of taking turns, asking questions, listening, and completing exercises or activities.
- Require participants to be fully dressed.
- Ask that cameras are not pointed to a bathroom door.
- Make sure participants can be seen clearly, no bright lights behind them creating a silhouette.
- No group chats or other platforms open during sessions.
- Explain to participants the importance of not posting/sharing personal details in an online platform.
- No sharing of inappropriate videos or photos.
- No verbal abuse or cyber-bullying
- All participants should stay in the virtual room with video/camera on (if applicable) notify the host if turning the camera off to go to the toilet etc.
- No recording, screen shots or sharing any of the meeting.
- Invite young people to speak with the moderator if they are feeling unsafe following the meeting.
- Request a contact number so the facilitator can reach young people directly if they are concerned about their safety.
- Provide a contact for a designated tech support person if internet drops out etc.

Participation and engagement

Creating an online group for LGBTQIA+ young people which is safe, accessible and well attended is challenging and an ongoing learning process. One of the best ways to learn is to ask the young people themselves. How can you involve the young people in the running of the group? What platforms are they most familiar and comfortable with? Can you use their expertise and input in these spaces? Involve young people in the direction of the group and ask them what activities they are interested in.

Evaluation

Give the group participants an opportunity to give confidential feedback on how they feel in the online group environment. Evaluate the successes and the challenges and evolve your group in response to these.

Experiences of HEY partners

We opened a discussion with some of the Healthy Equal Youth (HEY) partners, around their experiences of running online groups during COVID-19 restrictions and asked about some of the challenges and benefits. The major challenge faced has been lack of engagement. There are several reasons for this including:

- Online space fatigue or discomfort in online spaces.
- Lack of access to technology including devices, data and network connection.
- Unsupportive home environment.
- Some young people are not finding the sense of connection they are looking for in online spaces.



The major benefit that HEY partners have experienced in running online groups has been the increased opportunities for collaboration without the barriers of geography. Some of the positive outcomes from this include:

- Workers collaborating and combining groups which allows young people to make new friends and connections as well as easing the pressure on individual workers to find enough interesting material/activities or to hold the space for very small groups.
- Collaborating across groups to provide workshops and guest speakers.
- Working together to find creative ways to encourage engagement and connection.

As well as these new benefits, young people continue to benefit from the support, information and referrals that come from connecting with workers and peers. There is also real value in the young people knowing that someone is there for them, or there's a space they can go to, should they want to.

To read the full notes from this discussion refer to our resource:

[Challenges and benefits of running online groups](#)

RESOURCES

Rainbow Network 'Guidelines for Establishing Youth Groups'

Rainbow Network 'Challenges and benefits of running online groups'

Both also available from: <https://www.rainbownetwork.com.au/resources>

Zoom Security Controls:

<https://www.mcgrathnicol.com/insight/recommended-zoom-security-controls/>

Minus18 'Digital Events Guide':

<https://www.minus18.org.au/resources/minus18-digital-events-guide>

Online Safety from the eSafety Commissioner:

<https://www.esafety.gov.au/young-people>

'Toolkit for Schools' from the eSafety Commissioner:

<https://www.esafety.gov.au/educators/toolkit-schools>

Rainbow Network virtual back grounds: <https://rainbowhealthvic.org.au/news/rainbow-network-zoe-belle-new-zoom-backgrounds>

