Factsheet #9: Facilitating Safe Online Spaces

Online engagement with children and young people has become more commonplace since the Covid-19 pandemic forced us into the first lockdown. There is now an expectation that disabled children and young people, and those with special educational needs (SEN&D) are expected to work, learn and socialise online, a space that isn't always easy or comfortable for them.

Since early 2020 online engagement methods and delivery have come on in leaps and bounds, especially where online spaces have been co-designed with children and young people. Going forwards online youth engagement will continue to be and embedded part of participation and co-production practice. If done safely and well it is a vital space for their voices to be heard, as well as offering a chance to be part of communities; which can be essential for their happiness and wellbeing.

To facilitate effective online youth engagement children and young people with SEND need to feel that spaces are supportive, inclusive and non-judgmental in order to thrive and contribute with confidence. We asked children and young people what a safe online space meant to them, why they are so important and what they think we need to put into practice to create safer spaces online.

This resource, co-produced with children and young people, is a practical guide on creating safe spaces online for youth engagement.

This resource has been co-produced with children and young people with a range of support needs. Where it references 'talking', this is intended to encompass the full range of communication methods, including non-verbal communication, signing, and creative methods.

> "A safe space to me means a place where you're free to share your views and experiences, free from judgement and discrimination, but you are supported and your voice and experience is valued"- FLARE Member

1. Preparation

Preparing for a session is extremely important to creating safe spaces. Children and young people should know exactly what to expect from the space when they agree to participate. You can help by:

- Sending as much information as possible in advance. This could include an agenda or resources that will be used in the session. Some children and young people will need time to process information so they can feel confident in their contributions.

- Making sure you know in advance what online access requirements children and young people need and plan your session to meet those needs.

2. Introduction

Online sessions can be daunting for some children and young people, particularly those who may struggle with self-esteem or gauging social cues. It is important that children and young people feel able to bring their full selves and feel comfortable to participate at the level that feels right for them. Introductions are vital in setting the tone for the session and creating healthy boundaries and expectations. Here are some things you can do in within an introduction to help create a supportive, non-judgemental environment:

- Use inclusive language: introduce yourself and your pronouns

- Make it clear when children and young people can choose to be on or off camera

- Give space and support for all communication styles and let children and young people contribute in ways that they are comfortable with; this could be verbal engagement or using the chat bar

- Clearly state what will be covered in the session so children and young people know what to expect. Sending an agenda in advance is also very helpful.

- Set clear boundaries for children and young people communicating with each other: this could be about being clear to take turns to contribute or respecting others' opinions

- Remind them that it is okay to make mistakes!

"Safe space means a space that you can be yourself and fail and make mistakes without judgement" – FLARE member

3. Icebreakers and check-in

Working online gives children and young people the opportunity to connect with peers that they might not normally be able to. For some children and young people this is an exciting opportunity, but for others it can create a sense of anxiety if navigating new or unknown social situations. Icebreakers and check-ins allow facilitators to gauge how children and young people feel and respond appropriately. Creating a sense of belonging and establishing commonality between children and young people is a key component of a safe environment and icebreakers can be a fun and engaging way to achieve this. Make icebreakers and check-ins inclusive by:

- Ensuring everyone can access and contribute to them
- Keeping them fun and low pressure
- Building in opportunities for shared experiences to create a sense of community

> "we need to make sure that people don't fear ridicule or judgement but rather build a loving and accepting community" – FLARE member

4. Validation and adaptions

It can be difficult for children and young people to always feel confident in their opinions and contributions, so an important job of the facilitator is to validate what children and young people share. Validation doesn't have to be grand or hyperbolic and can start with just listening. If children and young people feel they are getting it wrong, or don't quite understand the expectations, it can create a reluctance to engage. If you feel that young people aren't understanding the task or content be prepared to adapt. You can show validation by:

- Using positive and affirming language
- Keeping an eye on the chat bar!
- Checking in on young people who appear less active or haven't contributed for a while –young people can feel lost in an online meeting and we don't have the same visual clues online, so be mindful
- Listening and summarising
- Reminding young people that they are the experts and their lived experience makes them the perfect advisors
- Planning alternative tasks and/or explanations where additional clarity or a conversation jump-start is needed

> "Online calls feel like safe spaces when everyone is listened to, and their contribution is valued and sought after" – FLARE member

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5. Endings and follow up

Ending online engagement can be abrupt and awkward. It is important that children and young people have appropriate time to prepare for the ending of the session and feel like they have had ample opportunities to have their say. It is good practise to allow time for a final check-in and opportunity to share last thoughts – this can help facilitators to understand how children and young people are feeling after the session, plan any follow ups with those that require extra support and make adaptations for following sessions/projects. When ending your session, take care to:

- Give children and young people time to prepare for the session to end
- Build in a final check-in and opportunity to share
- Follow up with any children and young people who gave cause for concern
- Send a summary of the meeting to all participants
- Make sure there is room for evaluation, questions and other feedback

"Online safe spaces are through making adjustment, setting clear expectations, space for feedback" – FLARE member

Further reading:

To read more on what effects and contributed to children and young people's wellbeing here.

The FLARE group have drafted a short Top Tip Resource to support accessible and inclusive online engagement here.

This resource is part of the Making Participation Work programme, a joint partnership between the Council for Disabled Children and KIDS, and funded by the Department for Education. For more information about the Making Participation Work programme, visit us here.

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