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Introduction

With the spread of COVID-19, instructors throughout the country are facing the challenging task of moving their classrooms online to be delivered through virtual education. These challenges include translating existing lesson plans and activities into an online format, choosing a virtual education platform (e.g., Zoom, Google Meet, GoToMeeting, Microsoft Teams) that fits your needs, preparing for technical challenges, overcoming distractions and planning for dynamic learner engagement. The SKW Virtual Education Best Practices Guide is a synthesis of best practices to consider when moving your education sessions online.

We start with the assumption that the Guide is being used by instructors who have experience with in-person education and are looking for guidance in moving to a virtual education platform. As such, we do not cover how to develop educational sessions for different target groups. Further, while the actual strategies and approaches for teaching children and adults vary, the best practices for doing that education virtually do not vary as much, so the best practice guidelines included here apply when teaching to both and are therefore general.

Given Safe Kids coalitions interact with and educate a wide age range of target audiences within their local communities, it is important for those planning and implementing the virtual education sessions to understand their audience in each situation and prepare their virtual educational plan and presentations accordingly. That means taking into account learner factors such as age, knowledge level, attention span, technology resources, hands on activities and more. Thorough planning and preparation will greatly help to provide and ensure a worthwhile and effective experience for the learner.

Finally, we are releasing this version of the Guide now as a starting point to assist coalitions who are already working to make the transition to virtual education. However, we know lessons will inevitably be learned as we all navigate this new educational space together. As such, we anticipate that the Guide will be periodically updated and expanded upon in response to those lessons.

Preparing for Your Session

Delivering an effective and engaging virtual education session will require careful planning and forethought. Below are some things to consider in the early stages of transitioning your course online.

Planning

- **Choose a virtual education platform that meets your education needs.** This document recommends a variety of activities and format considerations for your virtual sessions. Before considering these, you should be aware that there are a number of virtual education platforms available, each offering a different mix of features at different price points. Many offer a free version that may suffice depending on your session size and needs. Before planning out what you will include in your sessions and how you will carry them out, it is a good idea to become familiar with these platforms and what they offer. If you are able to choose, we have compiled a table of virtual education platforms and features (see Appendix 1) to help you select the platform that best

suits your needs. If you only have access to one platform, you should become familiar with that platform's features before planning out your virtual sessions.

- **Plan for classroom management.** Managing a virtual classroom can be a challenge, even if you are accustomed to managing in-person sessions. The complexity of managing a virtual session depends on how you facilitate the class. Address these questions when planning out your class:
 - Will you allow learners to ask questions verbally, or limit questions to chat?
 - Will you monitor the chat for questions and respond in real-time?
 - Will you take questions throughout the session, or dedicate a time for Q&A at the end?
 - Will you use breakout rooms for small-group discussions?
 - Do you want all learners to have their cameras on the entire time?
 - What will you do if learners have technical issues?
 - Will you record the session for learners who can't attend?
 - Will you need to engage an interpreter for your audience and build in time for translation in real time?
 - What approaches do you need to consider for learners who experience low literacy, learners whose second language is English or learners who aren't as familiar with/comfortable using technology?

Consider these questions before you begin to plan out your session, and especially before your sessions begin. The answers to these questions will have implications for many things, including what platform you use, what technical training you might need to operate the platform and whether you will need a co-moderator/instructor to assist.

- **Plan ahead for how you will administer evaluations.** One positive aspect of virtual education is that you can forego paper surveys by using online survey tools, such as Survey Monkey, REDcap or Google Forms. This can save you a lot of time as you no longer have to manually enter individual learner responses yourself. However, while convenient and time saving, successfully administering pre- and post-tests in a virtual setting requires some forethought from a logistics perspective.

Below are options for administering *pre-tests*. Think through which option might work best for you:

- **Option 1) Pre-tests as part of registration.** One way to reduce the amount of time taken up by a pre-test at the beginning of a virtual class is to ask that learners complete the pre-test ahead of the scheduled session date. Below are two ways this can be done:
 - First, the pre-test can be built into the session registration process. For instance, the first part of the registration form could ask the necessary questions for registration, and the second half could ask 4-5 pre-test questions to measure baseline knowledge.

- Alternatively, you could include the pre-test as a homework assignment in advance of the virtual class. For instance, you could include a link to your pre-test and ask learners to complete it prior to the session date, using a follow-up email confirming that the learner has successfully registered for the course along with any other information (e.g., instructions on how to access the online platform). Given this is a more passive option than including the questions as part of online registration, consider wording such as “To complete your registration, please click on the following link to complete a pre-survey.”
- **Option 2) Provide a link to the pre-test in the chat box at the beginning of the session.** Similar to in-person sessions, 5 or so minutes can be allotted at the beginning of the session to administer the pre-test. If choosing this option, it will be important to ensure learners are oriented to where the chat box is and know how to get back to the online platform once they’ve completed the pre-test.
- **Option 3) Use polling to administer the pre-test questions.** One drawback to using a clickable link to access an evaluation is that it will be launched in a browser window outside of the online platform environment. This may lead to lower completion rates because it is an extra step for the learner and also because there may be technology issues (e.g., browser incompatibility, hyperlink issues). If your platform supports it, another option is to administer the pre-test through a series of polling questions. While this means the learners can complete the evaluation without having to leave the platform, it may increase the amount of time needed as polling questions can only be posted one at a time and not everyone will respond at the same speed. Another issue to check is whether you can access the polling results after the session.

Below are three similar options for administering *post-tests*. Think through which option might work best for you:

- **Option 1) Provide a link to the post-test in the chat box at the end of the session.** Once the primary learning objectives have been covered in the session, you could pause and make an announcement to the learners that you are sending a clickable link to a short post-test through the chat box and then providing them 5 or so minutes to complete it, before moving to the session closing. By not putting the post-test at the very end (i.e. sandwiching it between the main content and final words, you may decrease the number of people who drop off without completing the post-test).
- **Option 2) Use polling questions to administer the post-test.** Similar to the option above for pre-tests, the post-test questions can be asked through a series of polling questions near the end of your session, if that feature is supported by your chosen platform. Same pros and cons apply.
- **Option 3) Include a link to the post-test in a follow-up email after the session.** Following the completion of the virtual session, a follow-up email that contains a link to a post-survey along with any other resources mentioned during the session can be sent to learners. However, as noted earlier, asking learners to complete surveys after the end of a session

may result in a lower completion rate. If using this option, providing incentives (e.g., gift cards, freebies) for completing the post-survey may help to increase the number of responses.

- **Consider having a co-moderator to assist during your sessions.** While you may be able to easily manage an in-person educational session on your own, a virtual setting can become hectic without proper planning. Responding to individual technical issues, monitoring the chat box and fielding questions can be difficult for an educator who is simultaneously presenting and engaging with learners. For these reasons and others, a co-moderator is a nice-to-have for smaller session sizes and can be a necessity for larger session sizes.

Examples in Action

Example: As learners arrive, let them know to type any questions into the chat box and have a co-moderator available to assist those experiencing technical issues so that you are able to promptly get started with welcomes, introductions, icebreakers, etc. As the session is unfolding, have the co-moderator continue to monitor the chat box for questions so that you can focus your attention on delivering your content and engaging with learners.

Before your session

- **Prepare your learners in advance of the session date.** In addition to preparing for the live educational session yourself, you should take the time to prepare your learners by sending a reminder before each session. Send an email introducing yourself along with a link to the session, instructions for downloading or updating needed software, your contact information (both email and phone), relevant materials, and a list of learning objectives and what they should expect (how the session is organized, etc.).
- **Encourage learners to safely attend and participate.** Learners may be tempted to multi-task while attending virtual sessions, which could lead to dangerous situations. When sending your introductory email, also emphasize that learners should have a quiet place free from distractions. Ask that learners not attend the course while driving a vehicle and that they have a designated adult to watch over children as they attend.
- **Practice your online session from start to finish, even if you are familiar with the agenda and content.** While you may feel comfortable with the subject knowledge you will be teaching your learners, the transition from in-person to an online virtual format makes practicing absolutely essential. A dry run can uncover a number of issues, from problems with the overall flow of your session to technology glitches. Additionally, practicing will help to ensure sure you are pacing yourself and staying within the time limit you are aiming for in your session. Practice transitioning between slides, polls, videos and other session elements, and make sure that you know how to use the chat function and other platform tools you plan to use.

Session Rehearsal Best Practices	
<i>Good</i>	By yourself, do a run through of each section of your educational session in order, and initiate every activity, graphic, slide transition, or other presentation element you plan to use. Speak with your camera turned on and use the audio channel you plan to use (VoIP ¹ or telephone). Record your run through for self-evaluation and to highlight areas needing improvement.
<i>Better</i>	Have colleagues, family or friends attend and listen as you run through your presentation, having them participate in the session just as your learners will. Ask them to provide feedback on any technology issues or issues with the course flow.
<i>Best</i>	All of <i>better</i> , but also have others interrupt you and ask questions, pretend to have technical difficulties as will likely happen during your presentation. Record your practice session. This will give you as close of a sense to how the actual educational session will go and will help you to identify unexpected issues.

Engaging Learners

Virtual education means that you are likely competing with a number of distractions. In addition to distractions in the learner’s environment (e.g., kids or pets in the background), learners may be tempted to check email or social media, chat with friends or surf the web during your session. As such, it’s critical to plan in advance ways to maintain a productive level of sustained engagement. Below is a synthesis of some of the most common tips and best practices available for contending with these distractions and maximizing engagement.

- **Don’t assume that your learners know how to use the functions of your platform.** Instead, build in time at the beginning of your session to cover the basics, like how to use the chat window for asking and/or responding to questions, writing on the whiteboard and raising their virtual hands. If delivering polls or other interactive activities, take a brief moment before initiating that activity to show your learners how to engage (e.g., “I’m going to ask you a question, and I’d like you to all respond by clicking the box next to your choice and hitting submit”).

Examples in Action
<p>Example 1: Ask learners to join the session 5 to 10 minutes early to make sure they are comfortable with the technology or have a couple of slides on screen before starting the session with instructions for testing their audio and video and how to use the main features.</p> <p>Example 2: As part of the welcome and overview of the platform, ask learners to enter their first name in the chat box. If your platform has a polling feature, start off with something fun and engaging, such as choosing their top ice cream flavor – this also helps introduce them to how to respond to a poll.</p>

¹ VoIP, short for “Voice over Internet Protocol,” is a term for using your computer’s built-in or external microphone to transmit your voice over the internet, as opposed to using the telephone.

- **Make learners feel welcome.** Virtual education can feel disconnected and cold, especially to learners who are used to meeting in person. When teaching an in-person class, you likely have your own ways of making learners feel welcome when they come to your education sessions. You may greet learners, smile and make eye contact. Use that same level of enthusiasm and sense of presence in your online classes. Most virtual education platforms will display each learner’s name — take advantage of this and refer to learners by their name when speaking to them.

Examples in Action

Example: As learners log on to the virtual session, have an icebreaker question posted on the screen that they can respond to. For example, you can ask learners about a time their child surprised them by doing something that they did not know they could do (see [Medicine Safety Teaching Presentation](#)). Have learners enter their response in the chat box. Using their names, you or your co-moderator can refer to some of the learners’ responses or ask learners if a few of them would like to share their story verbally.

- **Mind the length of your session.** Attention spans are an important factor when deciding the length of an educational session, especially when contending with the added learner distractions that come along with virtual education. As a general guideline, when possible, try to limit your session to no longer than 30-45 minutes from start to finish, including introductions, orienting learners to the platform, evaluations (e.g., pre- and post-session tests), other activities and times for questions. If this is not possible, you might consider “chunking” the content into multiple lessons.
- **Use video to establish an online presence.** Video casting with a camera is an effective way to overcome the sense of disconnectedness that often comes along with virtual meetings. Place your camera as close to the screen as possible, and, when possible, make eye contact by staring directly into the camera as you speak to learners.
- **Likewise, encourage your learners to use a camera.** Depending on the session format and number of learners, encouraging your learners to have their camera’s on can be an effective way of creating a sense of connectedness. However, while you should encourage camera use, it’s important that you do not allow it to become a barrier to participating in your session or that people feel pressured to use them. According to the U.S. Department of Commerce, 7 million school-aged children lived in homes without internet service in 2017.² Encourage cameras as an option, but do not require them.

Examples in Action

Example: When contacting learners ahead of time by email, phone, etc., encourage them to have their cameras on during the session so that you can feel as if you are in the same room with one another. You can encourage learners to have a fun video background that tells the others a little about them, such as an image of their favorite vacation destination or movie.

² Source: National Telecommunications and Information Administration USD of C. Digital Divide Among School-Age Children Narrows, but Millions Still Lack Internet Connections. <https://www.ntia.doc.gov/blog/2018/digital-divide-among-school-age-children-narrows-millions-still-lack-internet-connections>. Published 2018. Accessed July 15, 2020.

- **Focus on recapturing your learners' attention every 7 to 10 minutes.** Attention spans are shorter for people who are not in the room with you. This means that a traditional lecture or slide deck may become monotonous to learners, and suddenly social media can become a welcome distraction. To avoid this, focus on recapturing your learners' attention every 7 to 10 minutes by changing something up. This might include switching speakers, pausing for a classroom poll or knowledge check, showing a brief video, having a panel discussion or asking learners to share their own personal experiences.

Examples in Action

Example 1: If talking about safe storage, use a poll to ask learners where they store medicines or laundry packets in their home prior to explaining what safe storage means. This gets learners thinking about the topic without leading them to certain responses.

- **Design for engagement by building in active learning activities.** Learners need opportunities to not only listen to a presenter or read information, but to actively process the information they are receiving. Active learning is when a learner participates or interacts with the learning process, as opposed to listening to a lecture to passively take in information. Studies have shown that active learning helps learners to develop a deeper sense of understanding and practical application of knowledge than just mere knowledge retention.

You may have used active learning in your in-person education sessions in the past through interactive hands-on activities, polling questions, or games. While not all active learning activities can be carried out in a virtual classroom, many are still possible and even enhanced by technology. Examples of active learning activities that you can implement into your virtual sessions include:

- Demonstrating a safety product or safe procedure or showing an engaging video demonstration
- Conducting brief knowledge checks every 8-10 minutes of key concepts
- Asking learners to come to the course prepared with one burning question to ask you, giving some (or all, depending on the size) the chance to ask their question at the beginning of the session
- Asking questions that elicit prior knowledge or misconceptions, pausing for learner input
- Conducting live polling to gauge comprehension, opinions, and past behaviors and experiences
- Group discussions utilizing break out rooms
- Group role-playing utilizing break out rooms
- Simulation of safety products, techniques, safe behaviors
- Peer-to-peer teaching

Examples in Action

Example 1: If talking about safe infant sleep, use a doll-sized crib display to demonstrate what a safe sleep environment looks like.

Example 2: If talking about medicine safety, use images of different medicines and candy for a virtual medicine vs. candy lookalike game. Have learners choose whether the image is medicine or candy using poll or sending their response in the chat box.

Example 3: If talking about medicine safety, demonstrating a lock-box on camera.

- **Anticipate points where learners may become confused or bored.** During your practice session, ask those that are sitting in to provide feedback, especially where things might be confusing or boring. You may find that clarification is needed in some places, a quick break is needed or that a shift in delivery style could help. You might also note where concepts are difficult and do a brief check-in, asking learners to indicate they understand verbally or with a “thumbs up” in the chat box.
- **Use visual elements to convey your message.** Research has shown that visual representations help us to better retrieve and retain new information. Take advantage of virtual education to deliver more than just text-based information on a slide. When possible, try using infographics, videos, charts, and diagrams along with writing or drawing on the whiteboard to further engage learners.

Examples in Action

Example 1: If you are talking about a car seat feature, bring up a manufacturer website and show one of their videos or talk about the product information page.

Example 2: If you are talking about how to fit a bike helmet, bring up a helmet fit test video or show a graphic that represents the proper way a helmet should fit. Safe Kids Safety In Seconds: Bike Helmet video can be found on the [Safe Kids website](#).

Example 3: If you are talking about medicine safety, pull up an image of the most recent infographic and use the whiteboard feature in Zoom to have learners draw a star or check mark next to the information in the infographic they did not know or can relate to.

- **Add emotionally compelling stories or examples.** Storytelling is an effective instructional strategy that stresses the application and benefits of new information by connecting with your learners emotionally. Stories tend to communicate the importance of new information in a way that dry facts and statistics often cannot. Take advantage of the abilities of online platforms to help you weave in opportunities for storytelling, including guest presenters, sharing images and news clippings, or even showing story-telling videos from YouTube or other free online video sources.

Examples in Action

Example: Share a story about a car seat check that had an impact on how you communicate or a testimonial from a caregiver who has experienced a child injury at home. One or two learners may have a real-life story to share, too.

Appendix 1 – Feature Comparison of Platforms for Virtual Education Delivery

Feature	Platform					
	Zoom	GoToMeeting	WebEx	MS Teams	Google meet	Join.me
Cost (billed annually)	Free - up to 100 users; 40 mins \$15/mo./host - up to 100 users \$20 /mo./host - up to 300 users	Free - up to 3 users; 40 mins \$12/mo./host - up to 150 users \$16/mo./host - up to 250 users	Free - up to 100 users; 50 mins \$13.50/mo./host - up to 100 users	Free - limited paid - integrated with Office365	Free - up to 100 users; up to 60 mins enterprise - up to 250 users	Free - up to 10 users \$20/mo./host - up to 250 users (only 10 webcam streams) (\$13/mo./host with 501c3 status)
Maximum Number of Learners in a Single Session	100 for free account, 100+ for paid accounts	3 for free account, 150+ for paid accounts	100 for free account, varies for paid accounts	300 (free account MS-only)	100	10 for free account, varies for paid accounts
Max Session Time Limit	40 mins	40 mins	50 mins	n/a	60 mins	n/a
Polling¹	Yes	No	Yes	Using MS Forms	No	No
Chat	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Whiteboard²	Yes	Yes - "drawing mode"	Yes	Yes	No	No ("annotate" alternative)
Virtual Background³	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	No	No
Recording	Yes (hosting is pay only, local otherwise)	Yes	Yes (hosting is pay only, local otherwise)	Yes (pay only)	Yes (enterprise only)	Yes

Feature	Platform					
	Zoom	GoToMeeting	WebEx	MS Teams	Google meet	Join.me
Dial-in Option for Audio	Yes	Paid only	Paid only	Paid only	Paid only	Paid only
More Than One Presenter in a Single Session (on same license)	Yes (pay-only)	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes
Screen share ⁴	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Technical Support	Free plan – ticket system paid plans – ticket or live chat	Knowledge base/forum support	Free – knowledge base, documentation paid – phone support	Free – none paid – phone and web support	Paid only	Knowledge base, forum, email paid only – phone support
Can Join Via Mobile App	Yes, iOS and Android	Yes, iOS and Android	Yes, iOS and Android	Yes, iOS and Android	Yes, iOS and Android	Yes, iOS and Android

¹ **Polling:** a question or live vote taken during a session. Can be useful for gathering feedback on prior experiences, current knowledge, etc.

² **Whiteboard:** a blank virtual space where learners and/or the instructor can write, draw, share and interact with one another throughout the session, similar to a whiteboard in an in-person classroom.

³ **Virtual background:** an image or video displayed as the instructor’s or learner’s background during a virtual session when they are on camera. Can be useful for branding purposes or just for fun.

⁴ **Screenshare:** the practice of the instructor sharing the contents of their screen with the learners during the session. This can include all of the elements on the instructor’s screen or an individual window.

Appendix 2 – Resources

Platforms for Virtual Education Delivery:

Zoom: [Software Download](#) | [User Guidance](#)

GoToMeeting: [Software Download](#) | [User Guidance](#)

Cisco WebEx: [Software Download](#) | [User Guidance](#)

Microsoft Teams: [Software Download](#) | [User Guidance](#)

Google Meet: [Software Download](#) | [User Guidance](#)

Join.me: [Software Download](#) | [User Guidance](#)

Other Resources:

[How to Use the Whiteboard in Zoom](#) | Practical guidance to using the whiteboard feature in Zoom.

[Free Automatic Readability Checker](#) | A free readability score checker to test the readability score of text you plan to incorporate into slides, videos, etc.

[Unsplash](#) | A resource for royalty-free stock images you can incorporate into your session.

[Educator Reviewers Share Tips and Best Practices for Virtual Learning](#) | Learn from EdReports reviewers about how they are adapting to school closures and shifting daily learning for students online.

[Best Practices for Delivering Virtual Classroom Training](#) | A white paper providing suggestions and potential pitfalls when training a remote audience.

[Online Teaching in K-12: Models, Methods, and Best Practices for Teachers and Administrators](#) | A book with ideas, resources and assistance for pre-service teachers who are just learning about online teaching as well as in-service teachers who may need to transfer their in-person classroom to a partially or fully online format.

[As classes move online during COVID-19, what are disconnected students to do?](#) | An article describing how lack of access to broadband and other technology may make the transition to virtual education challenging for many.

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