

SEXUAL LIVES & RESPECTFUL RELATIONSHIPS: WORKING VIRTUALLY

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ABSTRACT

Whilst physically held apart by a global pandemic, the Sexual Lives & Respectful Relationships network (SL&RR) continued to seek connection and professional learning. Bringing innovation and creativity to the fore allowed the third annual SL&RR conference to forge ahead, virtually! We share our ideas for hosting your own successful virtual event.

SUMMARY

- Consider virtual events as a way of continuing your work during COVID-19 restrictions.
- Virtual events can help people come together without the challenges and added cost of travel.
- Training and support are important for access and confidence using technology.
- Plan and record key presentations in advance. This can be a good way to work with experts and presenters who live in different time zones.

PREPARING FOR OUR FIRST ONLINE CONFERENCE

Sexual Lives & Respectful Relationships (SL&RR) is a peer education network focussed on the relationship rights of people with intellectual disabilities, in the School of Health and Social Development at Deakin University. It is a peer led sexuality and relationships program run by people with intellectual disabilities and community professionals who are trained and supported by the SL&RR team at Deakin.

2020 was to mark the third consecutive national Sexual Lives & Respectful Relationships (SL&RR) conference, a place to gather and learn more about training others on sexuality rights. We held our first very successful conference at Deakin Downtown in Melbourne in 2018, followed by 2019, and we were keen to continue the exchange of ideas this year. However, the new decade has brought so many unimaginable challenges, including to the ways in which we could continue professional development.

Despite the global pandemic preventing us from meeting face-to face, the SL&RR network of Peer Educators and Program Partners continued to seek connection with the program and with each other. To foster inclusion and ensure that SL&RR would withstand the widespread effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, we chose to continue the annual SL&RR conference virtually.

We were unsure if an online conference might pose unexpected challenges for our core audience – people with intellectual disabilities who are often perceived to be on the margins of the digital divide. However we were surprised to realise that going online has possibly improved access for much of the network, which spans from Gippsland in Victoria to Sydney and the Blue Mountains in NSW. Importantly, the group changed circumstances as an opportunity to connect with each other digitally and to support people to use technology to make and maintain relationships.

Thirty people attended the online conference, including 14 people with intellectual disabilities, some using Zoom for the first time. Zoom worked really well, thanks to the behind-the-scenes work of SL&RR team member Monica Wellington who, with careful planning, supported attendees to plan their access to Zoom and to run through the processes, meaning that everyone felt confident using the technology on the day.

On the day of the conference, some attendees chose to log into the Zoom meeting up to 30 minutes before the start time. This meant they gained confidence and allowed the team enough time to trouble shoot any connection issues. Having two conference facilitators available during this log in time also meant that one person could welcome attendees and another could virtually assist people to connect.

THE SL&RR VIRTUAL CONFERENCE

The conference included a keynote address by Dr Claire Bates from the UK relationship rights movement, Supported Loving. Dr Bates prepared a pre-recorded presentation about her research and the work of Supporting Loving. A Question & Answer type discussion followed, proving to be just as effective on the virtual platform as it would have been in person. We were really motivated by Claire's work in supporting the sexuality and relationship rights of people with intellectual disabilities in the UK and the synergy with our own work in Australia.

We concluded the conference with the presentation of the Janice Slattery Award for an SL&RR Peer Educator or Program Partner who has made an outstanding contribution to their SL&RR site. With a record number of nominations this year and Janice Slattery herself in attendance to make the presentation, the award went to Rachael Walters from SL&RR in Gippsland. Rachael is a Peer Educator who has been involved in the Gippsland network since they commenced their work with SL&RR over 10 years ago.

Rachael's colleague Alisha said in her nomination:

“Rachael is a role model and an educator for people with and without disabilities. For meetings or program delivery, and whether the session be near or far, Rachael is always on time (or early), always prepared, always focused and committed to her work, and to contributing to a safer and more inclusive world for people with disability.”

A deserving recipient – congratulations Rachael!

WHAT'S NEXT FOR SL&RR?

Technology is interwoven into our lives more than ever before. Since the event, members have expressed appreciation for their new found skills, including how important strong technology skills are for social connection and for success in their work places.

Although we are looking forward to seeing each other face to face again in the future, we have received many requests for more digital forums, where our network can connect with their peers, colleagues, domestic and international specialists, and the Deakin SL&RR research team from the comfort of their own homes.

In this network, people with disability hold the space regarding sexuality rights for their own lives. Like a lot of other advocacy movements in Australia, the current requirement for physical distancing has not halted our agenda or discontinued our social connections. With the end of this pandemic far beyond the horizon, we encourage you to consider connecting and working on virtual platforms as a productive and valid option.



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TIPS FOR VIRTUAL EVENTS FROM THE SL&RR TEAM

- Online events can support social connectedness, as do in-person events.
- Online events can improve access for people living regionally who find it challenging to travel to inner urban venues.
- Use PowerPoint slides and pre-recorded presentations. These can be a good way to connect with presenters who live in different time zones.
- Offer training and support in preparation for an event. This can help people feel confident with using technology and can help to build skills that are useful for other settings.
- Offer all communications in plain English to suit a range of audiences.
- Using zoom on a laptop can be the most convenient format, rather than an iPad or phone. A laptop can run on Wi-Fi (to save on phone data) and is a more hands-free approach.
- It's important to have the zoom phone number on standby for an optional backup connection.
- Offer the opportunity to connect to the meeting in advance. This can help people feel comfortable that they have enough time to troubleshoot any connection issues.
- It is a good idea to share passwords or remove passwords for easy access.
- Encourage people to mute their microphone during presentations to avoid background noise.
- Investing in support and training can help to build skills for future events of a similar kind.