

Helping Youth Thrive in these Unpredictable Times

The Virtual Halton Youth Initiative Program

The goal of the [Halton Youth Initiative](#) (HYI) is to elevate youth voice and empower youth to have a positive impact in the communities of North Oakville, Acton, Aldershot and Milton. The project is youth-led, with young people identifying local issues and strategies for possible solutions. Activities are grounded in an [asset-building](#) approach and focuses on relationship building. Funded by the Ontario Trillium Foundation, the initiative brings youth and adults together to form [developmental relationships](#) in the four communities.

Youth Tackle Self-isolation: Using Technology to Cross Borders and Connect

By the time the Region of Halton instated COVID-19 pandemic emergency measures in early April, HYI youth groups had already begun to move the project to the virtual world. This important transition provided an unexpected opportunity for the four youth tables in North Oakville, Acton, Aldershot, and Milton to become borderless and to begin to connect with and get to know each other. Expanding their personal online communities to the other Halton HYI communities and beyond was a natural step for most of them.



Still Reaching Goals in the Virtual World

Core HYI goals:

1. Youth know more about local resources.
2. People and organizations know more about topics that matter to youth.
3. Youth work with community agencies to develop/promote positive youth hang-out space.

The four youth groups quickly found that they could continue their work virtually. They reorganized themselves into three online communities, each taking on one or two of the HYI core goals.

- Communications Crew focuses on creating informative and engaging content for social media, the HYI website (blogs and vlogs) and traditional media.
- Community Builders are developing campaigns that support or acknowledge specific groups of people in Halton during COVID-19, for example supporting seniors and acknowledging grocery store clerks.
- Creative Spaces group is developing virtual activities for HYI youth and other youth in Halton. They are also promoting opportunities in the community for youth participation.

Weekly ZOOM meetings facilitate discussions and planning, and the youth use Google Classroom and Google Drive to share and edit content they have developed for their projects. They have posted blogs, images and other information on social media, and written letters to the editors of local media for [National Volunteer Week](#), National Youth Week and about [addressing the COVID-19 pandemic](#). They are coordinating virtual card games with seniors, recording DIY tutorials face masks, and hosting Kahoot! quiz championships for Halton youth.

The Town of Halton Hills and Positive Space Network have requested specific content from our teams for their own youth engagement activities.

COVID-19 Virtual Response Game: Online Asset-Building

Most youth are feeling stressed, anxious, and bored during the pandemic. An empowering COVID-19 Virtual Response Team game was the answer to helping attend to these negative emotions.

Each week, youth and adult allies come together online to talk about one dimension of the [Developmental Relationships](#) framework. They participate in activities that connect with a weekly theme and compete for points and fun prizes.

For example, youth were asked to reflect on the Developmental Relationship dimension of *Challenging Growth* as it relates to their virtual participation.

How has changing everything onto a virtual platform in general challenged your personal growth?

“It’s helped me become more independent and create my own schedule.”

“I’m taking the initiative to ask others for help.”

“A lot of self-regulation...”

Self-motivation... “to focus on school work as there’s no strictness.”

Virtual Safe Space can Help Build Confidence and Boost In-person Participation in Future

The young people are responding positively to the three newly-formed groups and are growing through the virtual experience. Some who may not have high participation at in-person meetings are more confident and join in more within the virtual environment. The groups are learning the etiquette and protocols of meeting online as a group, such as one person speaking at a time and intentional listening. Skills that can support interpersonal in-person interactions later on.

Halton Youth Initiative coordinators, Siobhan Laverdiere and Lili Viggiano, continue to find ways to foster connections between team members, they are also trying to find innovative ways to create safe spaces online for some young people to make it more comfortable to participate. This may lead to increased confidence and self-esteem later with in-person group meetings and interactions.

If you are a community partner and want more information about the Halton Youth Initiative or would like get involved visit www.haltonyouth.com or contact program coordinators, Siobhan Laverdiere, siobhan@ourkidsnetwork.ca or Lily Viggiano, lily@ourkidsnetwork.ca.

Halton Community Partners Share Ideas and Information on Supporting Youth

More ideas and strategies on supporting and working with youth during the COVID-19 pandemic from the Oakville YMCA, Oak Park Neighbourhood Centre, Oakville Public Library, Nelson Youth Centres, Milton Public Library, Canadian Gap Year Association. [Download the PDF](#).