We are finding ourselves in an unprecedented situation since mid-March 2020 in New York State. In fact, as of March 16th schools in New York State have been closed. We all learned recently that they will remain closed through the end of the 2019/2020 school year. Additionally, no group gatherings are allowed due to the Executive Pause Order. As a 4-H Youth Development team we put our “planning caps” on and went right to work and designed the Jefferson County 4-H Virtual Academy. As of this time there are 485 registrations within the programs offered. Additionally, well over 250 4-H parents and 4-H volunteers have participated in the family engagement/literacy events we are providing. We wanted to ensure that we continued to provide the high-quality programming that our community and funders expect of us. We wanted to continue to connect with our local community members by providing research-based education. We needed to move forward to bring the education to the people where they are, and for now that is in their homes.

Virtual programming does allow youth programs to reach wider audiences and engage participants in creative and effective ways. In fact, online programming has grown in popularity as advances in social media and online communication has exponentially grown over the past 20 years. Youth-serving organizations now have an increased ability to move to the virtual world as another option to provide programs. Online programming is sometimes used to provide programs to isolated youth as a way of offsetting the distance. It is also increasingly used to supplement and augment face to face programs – strengthen the experience. And let’s all face it, youth are increasingly online during their free time – so we might as well meet them where they spend a lot of time. There is debate over the effectiveness of online learning for youth. There are youth who will benefit from a relationship with a caring adult in person. There are youth with disabilities that may have challenges learning in this type of environment. And there are experiences that can’t be had in a virtual environment.

Yet virtual programming can work to meet the research for positive youth development – which is to engage young people in intentional, productive, and constructive ways while recognizing and enhancing strengths. Programs that promote positive outcomes by providing opportunities, fostering positive relationships, and giving support that is needed to develop assets and prevent risky behaviors meets the research that has been done in this area. If youth are surrounded by a variety of opportunities for positive encounters they will engage in less risky behavior and will have higher rates of successful transitions to adulthood. We are aiming to meet the research for positive youth development within the variety of programs offered in the Jefferson County 4-H Virtual Academy.

Virtual programming will never replicate in-person youth programming that we offer – such as 4-H Clubs, 4-H Afterschool, 4-H Camp Wabasso and/or 4-H Community Education programs. How can it possibly replace moving your own dog through a rally course, or making apple cider with the press, or sitting in the planetarium surrounded by peers gazing up at a constellation, or racing a robot you designed with your close
friend across the room, preparing an entire meal and sitting down to share and eat it, or sharing your entrepreneur business plan with your community? It simply can’t do so, but for now we will all do our best to offer research based education programming through a virtual format, ensure it meets positive youth development research standards and continue to learn and grow together.

Resources used for this article:

https://youth.gov/youth-topics/effectiveness-positive-youth-development-programs

https://nationalmentoringresourcecenter.org/index.php/30-topic-areas/204-e-mentoring.html