



ROTARY YOUTH LEADERSHIP AWARDS

VIRTUAL RYLA BENEFITS AND SAFETY CONSIDERATIONS

What is a virtual RYLA?

A virtual RYLA is an engaging alternative to an in-person RYLA. Virtual RYLAs give young people a unique opportunity to develop leadership skills from their own home and collaborate with peers from other communities online. When they are structured, safe, and designed with specific goals in mind, virtual RYLAs can be just as valuable as in-person experiences. Aside from leadership and teambuilding skills, virtual RYLAs help participants gain self-confidence, improve their problem solving and communication skills, set and maintain goals, and understand ethics and conflict resolution — all of which will help them develop as young leaders, locally and globally.

What are the benefits of a virtual RYLA?

Virtual RYLAs develop participants' online communication and leadership skills. In many places, connecting online has become the norm. Virtual RYLAs give participants the chance to learn core RYLA values, such as leadership and effective communication, while using digital tools, including Zoom, Skype, Facebook, and Instagram. With proper guidance, participants also learn how to collaborate with others in a digital space.

Virtual RYLAs enhance past leadership experiences and spark curiosity about new ones.

For young people who have attended an in-person RYLA or served as leaders in their school or community, a virtual RYLA offers an opportunity to deepen their understanding of leadership, self-reflect, and develop more as a leader. For others, a virtual RYLA can be an empowering experience, inspiring them to pursue a leadership role in their academic or professional career.

Virtual RYLAs can engage specific groups around meaningful topics. Introduce young people to service and inspire them to start a project through Interact. Bring together secondary school students to discuss the importance of social justice and advocacy. Help young professionals hone their skills with resources from Rotary and Toastmasters International. You can tailor a virtual RYLA to a wide variety of audiences and interests

Virtual RYLAs are a unique way to engage alumni. Provide past RYLA participants, former Interactors, past scholarship recipients, and other alumni with a new Rotary experience. Virtual RYLAs can build on participants' previous involvement in Rotary and help them develop new connections around topics that are important to alumni. Later, they could even serve as facilitators, counselors, promoters, and youth leaders at in-person RYLA events.

Virtual RYLAs promote diversity and inclusion. Virtual RYLAs make dynamic leadership training available to a greater number of young people. When you aren't limited by the physical parameters of your district or event space, you can create inclusive, diverse, international experiences that reach more participants than ever before. Although in-person RYLA experiences are valuable, many barriers can keep young people from participating, including busy school or work schedules, physical or mental health challenges, and personal or family obligations. A virtual RYLA can provide underserved, underrepresented, and marginalized youths the opportunity to engage in meaningful workshops that promote personal and professional development, respect, and understanding.

What electronic and online safety considerations are important in planning a virtual RYLA?

In addition to ensuring compliance with RI policy and applicable youth protection requirements, it is the responsibility of those who administer virtual activities for young people to understand local laws related to data privacy and internet use involving minors, and to see that volunteers and program participants abide by them. If you are thinking about developing a virtual RYLA for minors or using technology to engage young people in other ways, we encourage you to consult with local youth-serving organizations and legal experts to confirm the standard level of care in your area. Also consider these general safety guidelines:

Establish boundaries and expectations. Ensure your district has a comprehensive youth protection policy that outlines standards specifically for electronic communication (including social media use) between volunteers and youths, and between youth program participants (See the [Rotary Youth Protection Guide](#)). Clearly communicate your policy and any consequences for violating it to volunteers, youths, and their families, so everyone is aware of the expectations before activities begin. Determine how to incorporate the following points into your district policy:

Communication:

- To ensure communication is appropriate and transparent between volunteers (including peer mentors) and youths, consider requiring that all communications, such as emails and text messages, have a second adult copied, whether it be a vetted volunteer or the youth's parent. This helps decrease the risk of misunderstandings and inappropriate interactions.
- Outline specific times when communication is allowed between volunteers and youths (for example, during the day only). If communication occurs outside that time frame, it could serve as a warning that interactions should be monitored more closely.
- Adults (or peer mentors) should not maintain private social media connections with a youth program participant. Instead, they are allowed to communicate only to closed groups of several participants.

Sharing or resharing participant content:

- Photos of or personal information about youth program participants should never be shared without the express permission and knowledge of their parent or legal guardian.
- Stories about and images of youth program participants should not be shared until the program or activity is complete, and only with the consent of participants and their parent or guardian.
- Never tag minors or share their username or handle online. This could threaten their safety by revealing their interests or the locations they visit often.

Educate everyone about appropriate behavior and ways to keep young people safe. One of the most important things you can do to protect youth program participants is to educate them, their families, and volunteers about online threats and how they can keep themselves and others safe. Ensure that your district's youth protection policy requires participants and volunteers to be properly screened and trained. Here are some key elements to incorporate into your training materials and conversations about online safety:

Describe common online threats:

- **Grooming.** Predators can be anyone — both adults and young people alike. They befriend young people online in order to take advantage of them. Once they've gained their trust, they may encourage participants to engage in harmful behavior, such as sharing inappropriate images and videos, or persuading them to meet in person.

- **Cyberbullying.** Online bullying can be just as devastating to young people as in-person bullying — or even worse, because individuals may say or do things online that they wouldn't normally do face to face.
- **Reputational risks.** Anything shared online can stay around indefinitely, even if it's a “temporary” post or message. Remind youth program participants that they should only post or share things online that they would feel comfortable sharing with family members, teachers, or future employers.
- **Peer pressure.** Peers have an enormous influence and can persuade one another to engage in harmful behaviors, such as playing risky online games, sending inappropriate photos, or bullying.

Before participants of these best practices for online activity, remind them to:

- **Avoid emotional posting.** Before engaging in any communication, participants should make sure they are not upset or angry, and that they are prepared to make smart decisions about what they send, post, or share — and with whom.
- **Be respectful of others.** Talk with participants about the consequences of their actions and the need to treat others as they would want to be treated.
- **Remain as anonymous as possible.** Participants should never share:
 - Their full name or the names of their family members (including pets)
 - Specific locations they are currently visiting or often visit (GPS apps and other mobile location services should be turned off)
 - Their home or school address, or the addresses of friends or family
- **Keep personal information private.** Participants should check that privacy settings are activated on social media sites and mobile apps, and connect only with people they know. They should also be careful when creating email addresses, screen names, and social media handles to ensure these do not reveal any personal information.
- **Think before sharing images of themselves or others.** Anything participants share may remain online forever. Explain the risks of sharing information about or pictures of themselves or others, including the consequences of others using their photos without their consent.
- **Speak up!** Participants should feel empowered and encouraged to report anything that makes them feel uncomfortable for any reason, including the treatment of others online or inappropriate messages or images.

Explain that volunteers and parents must be prepared to support participants as they navigate online activities. It is essential that they:

- **Understand the warning signs of cyber abuse.** Monitor participants and look out for signals that could indicate bullying or abuse, such as changes in behavior or attitude (see the [Rotary Youth Protection Guide](#) for more). Check in often to let them know you care about their emotional well-being.
- **Empower participants.** Give them the confidence to advocate for their own safety and feel comfortable making their personal boundaries known. Work with them to develop ways to deal with difficult situations and to speak up when they notice something wrong.
- **Invite participants to be part of the conversation.** Participants may know more about threats to their safety than adults. They should be involved in discussions about how to keep themselves and fellow participants safe. An open line of communication may also help them feel more comfortable speaking up if something happens.
- **Engage participants in productive, structured, and meaningful activities.** When participants focus on a specific goal or cause they are passionate about, they are less likely to engage in destructive or inappropriate behavior.

Consider using the examples below to illustrate productive behaviors and boundaries.

General verbal or written interactions. Ensuring appropriate interactions between adults and youths is just as important as maintaining physical boundaries.

Acceptable verbal or written interactions	Unacceptable verbal or written interactions
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Positive reinforcement • Encouragement • Praise • Administrative information or notifications about the activity 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Calling someone names • Adults discussing sexual encounters or personal problems with youths • Adults asking youths to keep secrets of any kind • Cursing • Discriminatory or sexual jokes • Shaming or belittling someone • Harsh language that may frighten, threaten, or humiliate someone • Negative remarks about a participant or about a person’s family, culture, religion, gender identity, sexual orientation, or background • Commenting on or complimenting a person’s body or body development

Electronic or online interactions. Communicating by text message, email, social media, or phone presents distinct safety challenges.

Acceptable electronic interactions	Unacceptable electronic interactions
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Texts or emails that copy or include another volunteer or the participant’s parent or guardian • Posts in a closed group with multiple participants, or on a website or social media page that is not visible to the public 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Harsh, coercive, threatening, intimidating, derogatory, or humiliating comments • Sexual conversations or images • Private messages between a volunteer and a youth participant • Posting pictures of youth participants on social media without consent from the participants and their parents/guardians • Posting inappropriate comments on pictures

Thank you for supporting Rotary’s young people, and for your efforts to create safe, meaningful, and engaging experiences for them. Questions? Email youngleaders@rotary.org.