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When the coronavirus (COVID-19) lockdown began midway through March, Stefan Meinzer felt like someone had turned the lights out on his entire life. Now the lights are back up, thanks to Gateways Support Services moving participant activities online.

The 21 year old from Laverton in Melbourne’s western suburbs has always enjoyed being busy, working as a packer at disability enterprise Yooralla and engaging in activities through registered service provider Gateways Support Services.

Stefan has an intellectual disability as well as autism and is a participant in the NDIS. Mum Lisa says Stefan was at a complete loss when both his job and community access were suspended.

“The last planned activity he did was a fishing trip with a group down to the Mornington Peninsula on 16 March,” Lisa says.

“After that he was stuck at home with nothing to do and he got quite upset about it. People with autism are often very routine-driven and that’s the case with Stefan, suddenly there was this big hole in his life.

“When Gateways contacted us about delivering activities online, he was really uncertain about it, the whole concept was all too new.

“They sent us an email with dates and times for the different activities that they were offering online, things like cooking, bingo, online Netflix parties. So I booked into all the sessions just to give it a go, then they sent us a link for Zoom and Stefan was able to jump straight in.

“On Tuesday night he does the Netflix parties with his group and they can type and chat to each other – Stefan can’t do written communication but the chatting is a good exercise to go with his speech therapy.

“Then on Wednesdays he does Zumba, which he really enjoys because it’s physical movement and he can see everyone else doing it. Exercise is very important for him.

Lisa says Stefan has got to the point where he really looks forward to his online activities.

“It’s just fantastic, the communication has been excellent,” Lisa says.

“Sometimes Stefan gets bored and wants to go back to work, but Gateways is continuing to introduce new activities. They’ve just started a cooking safari, and a support worker will actually come to help him with the recipes and food prep.

Lisa says the move online has worked really well for her son.

“He can see the familiar faces and things haven’t changed too much for him, maybe some of the online stuff can keep going once everything gets back to normal,” she says.

Lisa points to Stefan’s speech and occupational therapy sessions, which have continued uninterrupted via Zoom during the lockdown.

“That’s been really good, and we’ve been able to maintain home visits from a support worker who takes him out walking around the neighbourhood three or four times a week,” she says.

“Stefan will go back to work once all this is over but there’s aspects of the ‘new normal’ that might remain.”

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