

Connecting Care: Telehealth's Impact on Early Intervention in Physical and Occupational Therapy

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The rise of telehealth has transformed how we provide care, and its benefits have proven to be especially profound in the realm of early intervention for physical and occupational therapists. Gone are the days of packing up equipment, navigating traffic and spending all day driving (or even flying!) to remote areas to meet with families. Telehealth has given therapists and families a convenient, flexible and often more

effective way to connect. Not only does this ease logistical challenges, but it also opens up a world of possibilities for incorporating coaching, motivational interviewing and routines-based interventions into therapy practices.

Funding for telehealth services in early intervention for PT and OT in the United States has become easier post-COVID, and the demand for remote health-

care options is rising. Initially, telehealth reimbursement for early intervention services faced significant barriers due to the complex regulatory landscape and varying policies at both the federal and state levels. However, over the past few years, several federal programs, including Medicaid and the Children's Health Insurance Program (CHIP), have expanded coverage for telehealth services, recognizing its effectiveness and

necessity in providing care to underserved populations. This expansion has been particularly beneficial for families in rural or remote areas, where access to in-person therapy is often limited. Many states have also introduced specific telehealth reimbursement policies, helping to bridge the gap between the availability of services and the financial support needed to sustain them.

CONTINUED ON PAGE 24

Despite these advancements, funding for telehealth in early intervention remains inconsistent across different states, and some challenges persist.

In many cases, reimbursement rates for telehealth services still vary, and some private insurance companies are slow to adapt to the evolving landscape. Additionally, there are concerns about the long-term sustainability of funding as the telehealth model continues to grow.

To further enhance telehealth access for early intervention, ongoing advocacy is needed to standardize reimbursement practices and ensure equitable access to these vital services for all families, regardless of location. The future of telehealth funding in early intervention looks promising, but continued efforts to secure stable and comprehensive funding sources will be crucial for ensuring these services remain accessible and effective.

One of the most important shifts telehealth encourages in early intervention is a move away from the traditional “hands-on” approach. While PT and OT are experts in facilitating development and rehabilitation, we’ve long known that doing things for children is not the same as teaching families how to incorporate strategies for participation across their day. This is especially true in early intervention, where the goal is not only to support the child’s growth but also to empower caregivers and

families with the tools they need to continue progress when the therapist is not around. Educating families and caregivers about assistive technology as well as maintaining the equipment is also possible through telehealth.

When it comes to assistive technology like seating, standing, stepping and power, telehealth is a natural fit. Instead of therapists going to homes and physically intervening, telehealth enables a coaching model. A therapist can interact with a family remotely, guiding them to incorporate therapy strategies into the child’s daily routines. The therapist’s role becomes less about direct physical assistance and more about offering support, insight and advice on how to adapt the environment, modify tasks or encourage the development of new skills.

This approach benefits the family by building their capacity to solve their own challenges, teaching them how to be the primary agents of change, while the therapist can step back and provide expert guidance from a distance. Together, the caregivers and therapists identify needs, goals and strategies to create fun and function.

Coaching: A New Way to Engage Families

Coaching is one of the most powerful methods telehealth allows for in early intervention. When therapists adopt a

coaching approach, they are focused not just on what tasks the family needs to complete, but on how to empower the family to facilitate these changes themselves. This dynamic shifts the relationship from one of passive receipt of information (i.e., “the therapist tells the family what to do”) to one of collaboration and partnership. Therapists work to elicit solutions from the family, creating a more individualized and authentic process for child development, on-time mobility and all the F-words (fun, fitness, future, functioning, family and friends)!

By using coaching techniques in a telehealth setting, therapists can observe a family in their own environment and provide real-time guidance on how to incorporate therapeutic exercises into daily life. For example, a therapist might suggest simple strategies for engaging a child during mealtime or bedtime routines, allowing the family to practice these skills in the real-world context that will lead to more sustainable outcomes. This coaching model highlights the idea that therapy doesn’t just happen in scheduled sessions – it happens everywhere, all the time.

Motivational Interviewing: Encouraging Lasting Change

Motivational interviewing is another method that shines when paired with telehealth. This client-centered, collab-

orative conversation style is designed to help individuals explore and resolve ambivalence about behavior change.

While therapists may encounter families who are unsure about their ability to incorporate activity and participation into their daily lives, motivational interviewing offers a supportive way to uncover the family’s motivations, concerns and desires. Therapists can also help families understand why a focus on body structure and function doesn’t lead to participation, yet a focus on participation has been shown to benefit body structure and function.

Through telehealth, therapists can ask open-ended questions that encourage families to reflect on their goals and values, helping them connect their personal reasons for making changes. Doing this remotely, rather than in person, has been reported to be less stressful than in-person meetings for some families. It’s a relief not to have to clean their house, corral all the animals and shovel the stoop to get ready for your visit!

Whether it’s improving the child’s mobility or developing fine motor skills, motivational interviewing guides families toward intrinsic motivation, making them more likely to follow through on therapeutic recommendations. The ability to have these conversations in a relaxed, familiar environment – their own home – can make it easier for families to express their feelings and open up about their challenges.

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Early intervention, like all therapy, is relationship-based. Families and therapists alike report that telehealth does not interfere with this relationship and may improve missed visit rates.

Routines-Based Interventions: Integrating Therapy Into Daily Life

Perhaps one of the greatest benefits of telehealth in early intervention is its ability to facilitate routines-based interventions. This approach prioritizes the natural rhythms of a family's day and embeds therapy into these routines rather than creating a separate "therapy time." The beauty of routines-based interventions is that it focuses on what is most relevant to the family. It recognizes that the parent's (caregiver's) time is valuable and that it's more practical to build therapeutic activities into existing daily routines, such as dressing, bathing or playing with siblings. Telehealth also might make it easier for therapists to connect with childcare providers, grandparents and all the people that care for the child (remember to get signed permission via the IFSP process).

During a telehealth session, a therapist can go through a typical day and identify specific moments where they can apply therapy techniques. For example, a parent may want to encourage their child to work on walking during grocery store

visits (take your supported stepping device or GoBabyGo car with you!) or use playtime to strengthen fine motor skills.

By making therapy part of the natural flow of life, telehealth allows therapists to empower families to make small but meaningful changes that lead to big developmental gains.

Remote Convenience: Bridging the Gap for Rural Families

Telehealth also brings a level of accessibility to families that was previously unavailable to those in remote or rural areas. For many families, travel time and the expense of getting to therapy sessions can be significant barriers. This is where telehealth shines, offering families a more flexible option for accessing services. With telehealth, therapists can schedule sessions during times that are convenient for families, avoiding the need to travel long distances and missing out on the benefits of consistent intervention.

For therapists, it's a game-changer, too. By cutting down on travel time, they can focus more on direct service delivery and spend time working with more families, particularly those who are difficult to reach otherwise. It's a win-win situation, allowing therapists to extend their reach while providing families with more consistent care in a way that fits seamlessly into their busy lives.

The Bottom Line: Telehealth as a Perfect Venue for Effective Therapy

At its core, early intervention is about helping families thrive in the environment they know best – their homes and communities. Telehealth allows for a more flexible, sustainable and impactful way to deliver therapy. By focusing on coaching, motivational interviewing and routines-based interventions, therapists can offer a more empowering approach to families, guiding them toward long-term success full of participation and happiness.

While handling and facilitation might have been the primary strategies in the past, the future of therapy lies in empowering families with the skills, confidence and motivation to lead the charge. Telehealth is the perfect venue for this shift, allowing therapists to be both hands off and highly effective in guiding families toward lasting change. With telehealth, therapists are not just visiting homes – they're making therapy a natural, ongoing part of everyday life.



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