

The Need for Telehealth in Special Education

PREPARED FOR

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Introduction

This paper discusses the need for adoption of telehealth services into every school system, either as a short-term stopgap, a long-term solution, or as part of a hybrid program combining live and virtual services. Included in the discussion are challenges and benefits of telehealth, along with a guide to ensure that schools find the best telehealth provider for them. By identifying this need and providing a specific solution, schools will be better equipped to meet the needs of their diverse learning populations, and TalkPath Live will meet those needs using innovative technology, special education expertise, and personalized service that is unmatched in the staffing company sphere.

Background

What Is Telehealth?

“Telehealth” is a generic term that encompasses all aspects of healthcare using computer technology (Cason, 2014). In the rehabilitation field, clients are seen through a video connection in a virtual treatment room. Resources are utilized to provide guiding principles for the telehealth therapist (Richmond et al., 2017). Within the special education field, related service providers partner with teachers, e-helpers (adult present with student during sessions), and students to provide direct treatment and consultative services for highly collaborative and effective programs that meet students in their area of need. The age and ability of the child will determine the level of assistance an e-helper must provide.

Direct treatment services provided in this way are using synchronous, or real-time, technology. Services can also be provided using asynchronous technology, in which information is submitted via store and forward programming between a client and therapist. The technology used meets industry standards for privacy and confidentiality. Research has consistently shown outcomes measures to be equal to or greater than in-person treatment, and clients report high satisfaction levels with this type of service modality (Criss, 2013). Telehealth therapy is considered a service delivery model, meaning that it does not require a special certification to provide this type of therapy (Richmond et al., 2017).

Benefits of Telehealth

Over the last several years, the use of telehealth has proven its worth in numerous ways. The amazing benefits of using a telepath model include:

- **Ease of access** for those in rural areas or those in areas experiencing a staffing shortage of speech and occupational therapists: with as little as a computer, webcam, and internet, clients can suddenly connect with a therapist anywhere in the world.
- **Collaborative nature of virtual therapy:** because the treating therapist is not physically present with the client, a family member or other designated assistant participates in therapy sessions. Using these e-helpers allows for greater understanding of the treatment plan and techniques used, often resulting in more consistent carryover between sessions.
- **Cost-effectiveness:** therapists who work from home do not need to travel between facilities, allowing them to be more efficient with their time. Schools with tight budgets do not need to pay for travel between locations and are able to utilize therapists in a more efficient way, saving costs and allowing for more time spent with clients.
- **High motivation:** Many clients find the virtual platform to be more comfortable, as it can be accessed from their own natural environment. Younger clients enjoy the use of technology and are often highly motivated to participate using this format.

Challenges of Telehealth

As with anything, telehealth therapy comes with its own set of unique challenges. These include:

- **Internet connectivity:** those in rural areas often have limited access to reliable internet service. This is continuing to improve, but at this time, some clients might not be able to access the secure video connection needed for a remote therapy session.
- **Steep learning curve for therapists:** some therapists might find it challenging to convert therapeutic techniques to a virtual model. It is important to find qualified personnel with experience in both special education and telehealth to meet the needs of students in an effective manner.
- **Control of the environment:** because the therapist is not physically present, some factors in the environment, such as light or sound, might prove distracting. E-helpers can assist in this way by ensuring that the environment is as free of distractions as possible.
- **E-helper and equipment requirements:** schools and families must provide an adult to assist during a virtual therapy session, as well as have an internet-connected computer (preferably high-speed) with audio/video capability (webcam, microphone, and speakers) to access the therapist. Although this might initially seem problematic, the reality is that e-helpers provide varying levels of support, meaning that they are not necessarily required to devote their full attention to the therapy session. Furthermore, the use of e-helpers most often results in greater understanding and carryover of therapy techniques between sessions, improving outcomes measures and client satisfaction. Additionally, the equipment required is not specialized and is usually already in the client's possession.

Area of Need

Occupational therapists, physical therapists, speech-language pathologists, and mental health counselors have always been in high demand within the school system (Special Education Personnel Shortages Factsheet, n.d.). It is not uncommon for a therapist's caseload to top 100 students, all with unique needs. Additionally, teachers need support to meet multiple learning and developmental differences, making it difficult to provide quality care amid staffing shortages. Even within a school system that is fully staffed, a therapist or counselor who needs time off will find themselves with no replacement, so students will require makeup sessions upon the therapist's return. The push for the inclusion of special education students into the mainstream classroom has created a greater need for teachers to be well equipped to address multiple learning styles and create solutions for a host of issues, ranging from attention difficulties to sensory needs to differential instruction. Related service providers have found their referrals skyrocketing as a result of this trend. Teachers are improving their ability to identify needs earlier, resulting in better outcomes for students. However, with the better identification of learning needs comes a shortage of qualified personnel to provide the related services necessary for a student to succeed in a general education classroom (Special Education Personnel Shortages Factsheet, n.d.).

Both special and general education programs require the availability of related service providers who can make themselves available in a timely manner for consultations, evaluations, team meetings, and direct treatments. The sole use of in-person providers relies on the ability of said providers to travel to the school when needed for consultations, treatments, and meetings. Such on-demand requirements decrease the efficiency of personnel and result in higher costs for the school. In rural areas or areas of short staffing, such an option might not be available at all, no matter the cost. Telehealth, or virtual therapy, can address this need by allowing students in rural or high-need school districts to access their services with little more than a computer, webcam, and internet connection (Cason, 2014).

Solution

Telehealth is an ideal solution for those living in areas without access to related service providers. It also offers the flexibility to quickly cover unexpected staffing shortages due to illness, maternity/family leaves, or other unforeseen circumstances. Finally, the use of telehealth as a hybrid solution with a live therapist can split the workload, allowing the on-site therapist to devote his or her attention to those students who require more hands-on services. The remote therapist can fill in the gaps by working with more independent students, attend meetings, and meet with teachers for consultations. Telehealth provides the perfect answer to the constant dilemma of what to do when the staff therapist's caseload fills to capacity.

Even given all this, not all telehealth solutions are equal. TalkPath Live pairs special education expertise with highly qualified therapists and innovative technology to provide individualized and effective related services to students with special needs. While many staffing companies are run by business professionals, TalkPath Live's leadership team has extensive experience in K–12 and special education services. The highest priority is given to meeting the needs of students. With a staffing pool licensed in all 50 states, therapists are ready to help any child, anywhere.

Finding the Right Fit

As previously stated, not all telehealth options are created equal. Business and finance often trump quality, and the telehealth field is no exception. Schools have a responsibility to meet their students' needs, and they must feel comfortable relying on other professionals as part of the IEP (Individualized Education Plan) team process. In order to ensure those needs are being met, school personnel should ask these questions of their telehealth provider:

- *Why did you choose the telehealth field?*
 - Ideally, schools need a company with a heart for service as their primary motivation. Too often, business-minded individuals see telehealth as a way to jump into an untapped field, increasing revenue. While this is not inherently bad, companies that place the priority on meeting needs rather than maximizing profit will offer the greatest service quality for the most reasonable cost.
- *What is your career background?*
 - Again, the ideal scenario is to choose a company whose leaders know special education. This will ensure that they understand IDEA (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act) requirements on an ever-shifting educational landscape and adjust accordingly.
- *How do you choose your therapists?*
 - Even within school-based therapy, a certain level of clinical knowledge is required. Companies should have clinical leaders with a background in therapy to recruit the highest-quality therapists who are familiar with the telehealth service delivery model.
- *What support do you provide to your therapists?*
 - Therapists need ongoing clinical support to effectively provide treatment for their diverse caseloads. This could be in the form of optional training videos, access to office hours with leadership, or live meetings with clinical supervisors.

- *What methods do you use for note taking, data collection, and report writing?*
 - The best scenario is one in which telehealth providers default to the school's notes and reports template but also have a template of their own should the school choose to use it.
- *Who can we contact if we have issues related to therapy services?*
 - Schools should not only have access to the account manager but also to clinical supervisors in the case of therapy-related questions or concerns.
- *How do you ensure continuity of care?*
 - Continuity of care is provided through ongoing education available to related service providers.

Although cost is usually the primary consideration for tight budgets, it should be tempered with the experience and background of those providing the service. TalkPath Live's extensive experience within the field of special education means that the top priority is placed on hiring effective therapists and providing individualized service. A simple fee structure means no hidden costs, and flexibility in the paperwork process ensures that individual requirements are met.

Conclusion

Now more than ever, special education requires quality service providers for its growing needs. TalkPath Live is in a unique position to meet those needs through the use of telehealth related services. Administrators who put their trust in TalkPath Live's expertise will benefit from reliable services, affordable cost, and unmatched quality. Bolstering special education resources through the use of telehealth rehabilitation is a smart decision for any school district. The telehealth option innovates the world of special education by providing infinitely customizable solutions and a responsible use of resources. TalkPath Live stands poised at the forefront of this innovation by combining telehealth technology with high standards based on extensive special education and related service experience, an ideal combination for students of all abilities.

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