



# Telehealth and Children's Mental Health

A GUIDE FOR PARENTS

The coronavirus pandemic has been hard on kids and teens everywhere — especially those who were already dealing with mental health challenges. Stay-at-home orders disrupted care, both for kids already in treatment and those seeking to start treatment. Ongoing restrictions and safety issues may continue to make in-person treatment daunting.

During this time, telehealth (which uses technology to deliver healthcare remotely) has emerged as a promising treatment option for children's mental health. The use of telehealth has expanded rapidly since the start of the pandemic, and regulations have shifted to make it more accessible to families around the country.

But how does telehealth work? And is it the right choice for your child? In this guide, we offer an overview for parents of what telehealth looks like, how it can help kids with mental health challenges and how to know if it makes sense for your child. For more details on telehealth and children's mental health, check out our 2020 Children's Mental Health Report ([childmind.org/2020report](http://childmind.org/2020report)).

Plus, we've got perspectives from a new Child Mind Institute/Ipsos survey on parents' experiences using telehealth for their children's mental health treatment. Conducted in September 2020 with a representative sample of 351 American parents who have recently used/sought out mental health treatment for child, this survey offers unique insights into the rapidly changing landscape of telehealth for children's mental health.

You'll find perspectives from this new survey throughout the report, and you can access the full results at: [www.ipsos.com/en-us/parents-children-telehealth](http://www.ipsos.com/en-us/parents-children-telehealth)

#### WHAT KINDS OF CHILDREN'S TELEHEALTH SERVICES DO PARENTS SEEK OUT?

According to our new poll, talk therapy is the most common service parents have accessed or sought out through telehealth for their child, followed by psychiatric medication consultation and cognitive behavioral therapy.

- Talk therapy: 49%
- Psychiatric medication consultation: 32%
- Cognitive behavioral therapy: 31%
- Occupational therapy: 26%
- Learning disability intervention: 24%
- Other: 1%

#### How does telehealth work?

Put simply, telehealth is any treatment in which a practitioner provides care via technology instead of in-person appointments. Options include:

- Live video calls
- Phone calls
- Text chat
- Mobile health apps
- Electronic prescriptions

Like in-person mental health treatment, telehealth options can often provide treatment for families and groups as well as individuals.

Details depend on the provider, the treatment type and your child's individual needs, but telehealth psychotherapy sessions often look similar to in-person ones. The main difference is that your child interacts with the treatment team from home, instead of in an office.

Diagnosis, ongoing treatment and medication management can all be provided via telehealth, and a number of evidence-based treatment options (including cognitive behavioral therapy) have been shown to be effective when delivered via telehealth.

### WHAT KINDS OF CHALLENGES LEAD PARENTS TO SEEK OUT TELEHEALTH FOR THEIR CHILDREN?

Our poll indicates that anxiety and depression are the most common mental health challenges leading parents to seek telehealth services for their child. A number of other challenges are also common.

- Anxiety: 40%
- Depression: 37%
- Problem behavior: 30%
- Attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD): 30%
- Learning challenges: 23%
- Grief/loss: 14%
- Eating disorder: 14%
- Obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD): 14%
- Autism: 14%
- Suicidal thoughts, plans or attempts: 9%
- Sensory processing disorder: 1%
- Other: 3%

## What mental health challenges can telehealth help with?

Research shows that telehealth can be an effective treatment for many common mental health challenges among children and teenagers, including:

- Autism spectrum disorder (ASD)
- Anxiety (including selective mutism, separation anxiety, social anxiety and phobias)
- Attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD)
- Behavior problems
- Bipolar disorder
- Depression
- Developmental disorders
- Eating disorders
- Obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD)
- Suicidality and self-harm
- Substance use disorders
- Trauma and stress (including post-traumatic stress disorder or PTSD)

“I think she felt it has been helpful to talk with an outside person about current issues. She had a chance to talk through feelings and come up with a plan of action.”

## What are the advantages of telehealth?

Telehealth can break down barriers to care in several important ways.

- **ACCESS TO PROVIDERS:** Because you don't need to travel to sessions in person, telehealth can make it easier to find the right person for your child. For instance, one who's affordable, who has expertise in a particular diagnosis or treatment, or who shares your family's cultural background.

**WHAT PARENTS ARE SAYING**

Among those who have used telehealth services since the start of the pandemic, opinions and experiences are overwhelmingly positive.

- 85% of parents who have used telehealth since the start of the pandemic say that their child has benefitted from these services.
- 84% say that the experience of participating in telehealth sessions has been positive for their child.
- 78% report seeing a significant improvement in their child's symptoms since starting telehealth treatment.
- 87% would recommend using telehealth services for children with mental health or learning challenges.

**Here's how some parents describe the benefits of telehealth:**

"My son really enjoys being able to sit in his room and have therapy, not having to get on the bus and then walk to the appointment."

"She was already familiar with this provider so it was an easy transition from in-person to telehealth. They were able to pick up where they left off when offices were closed."

"He talked on the phone himself instead of looking at me for answers."

"His learning ability improved, he became less anxious and his mood enhanced."

"I think she felt it has been helpful to talk with an outside person about current issues. She had a chance to talk through feelings and come up with a plan of action."

- **SCHEDULING:** Without the logistics of traveling to sessions, it can be easier to schedule appointments at times that work for your family and stick to a consistent treatment plan.
- **COMFORTABLE SETTING:** For some kids, receiving treatment online from the familiarity of their own homes makes it easier for them to open up about their struggles.

has expanded during the coronavirus pandemic, but again, policies are changing quickly and may make it harder to find affordable care via telehealth.

"He told me he did not like it. He wanted to see the doctor in person."

**What are the drawbacks of telehealth?**

Some aspects of telehealth can be challenging, whether because of regulatory complexities or logistical difficulties.

- **LICENSING:** Each U.S. state has its own licensing requirements for healthcare professionals, which can create challenges if you want to use a provider in another state. Many states loosened rules during the pandemic, but these rules are still changing and are often confusing to navigate.
- **INSURANCE:** Telehealth services are not always covered under health insurance plans. Coverage for telehealth

- **TECHNICAL DIFFICULTIES:** High-speed internet is crucial for many forms of telehealth, and connection or hardware issues can interrupt sessions. Providers also need to follow information security regulations, which can be a barrier to offering treatment via telehealth.
- **PRIVACY:** It can be difficult to find a quiet, private spot at home for your child to engage in telehealth sessions.
- **BUILDING RAPPORT:** Some kids might find it more challenging to build a therapeutic relationship with a treatment provider via telehealth, where social cues like body language and tone of voice can get muddled.

**WHAT PARENTS ARE SAYING**

Parents in our survey also reported some difficulties with telehealth. Some considered using telehealth, but did not follow through for a variety of reasons:

- Child wouldn't cooperate: 27%
- Opted to start or continue in-person treatment instead: 26%
- Concerns about cost: 23%
- Concerns about privacy: 23%
- Couldn't find appropriate professional: 21%
- Language barrier: 12%
- Other: 2%

**Other parents did use telehealth for their child's mental health, but encountered challenges. Here are some of the experiences they reported:**

- "He told me he did not like it. He wanted to see the doctor in person."
- "She enjoyed it but she enjoys her sessions in person a lot more."
- "He has a hard time opening up and staying focused during telehealth visits and usually doesn't want to be bothered with them."
- "It's difficult for her to understand what's going on and why, when speaking to the psychologist. Not interacting with her behavioral specialist has decreased her ability to apply learned skills to real life."
- "Making my child concentrate [is a challenge and he gets] distracted with his brother and sister being around."

**How do you know if telehealth is right for your child?**

Telehealth might be a good option for your child if:

- It's difficult to attend in-person sessions: Whether it's because of coronavirus-related restrictions, transportation issues or scheduling difficulties, getting to in-person treatment sessions can be tough. If that's the case for your family, telehealth might be a better option.
- You're having trouble finding the right provider: Maybe there aren't any specialists in your area, or you want to work with someone who understands your family's culture and views on mental health. Telehealth can increase the odds of finding the right fit for your child.

- You or your child aren't comfortable with in-person sessions: If you prefer not to visit a provider's office, or if your child is especially shy or anxious, telehealth might be more comfortable for your family.

Telehealth isn't for everyone. It can be particularly challenging for young children, those with severe developmental delays, or youth with severe mental health or behavior challenges. If you think your child might not be able to focus for the duration of a telehealth session or participate through technology, in-person session may be a better choice.

## Tips for Finding a Telehealth Provider

There are lots of ways to find a qualified telehealth provider:

- **Evaluators:** If your child has already had a formal psychological evaluation, you can ask the evaluator for recommendations.
- **Current providers:** If you or your child already see a provider, you can ask if they offer remote options or know of any colleagues in their field or related ones who might.
- **Pediatrician:** Your child's pediatrician is always a good first stop. They may keep a list of local providers you can check with.
- **Your insurance provider:** Often your insurance provider will have a searchable database of in-network providers. Some even have the ability to filter by providers who offer remote services.
- **Universities and teaching hospitals:** Many telehealth programs are run through universities and teaching hospitals, so it's worth taking a look at some of the big ones in your state.
- **Internet search:** Try searching for the kind of provider you want plus the word "remote" and your state to see what pops up.
- **Online parent groups:** There are groups based on location as well as groups for parents of children with every diagnosis under the sun.
- **Professional organizations and nonprofits:** Search for professional organizations and nonprofits associated with the type of care you're looking for. Many offer directories of providers.

No matter how you find your provider, remember that a high standard of care and a good fit with your child are key. Here are some questions you can ask potential telehealth providers:

- What is your training and experience?
- What kinds of treatment do you typically offer?
- How does your remote treatment differ from in-person?
- What privacy measures are in place for remote sessions?
- Do you accept my insurance?
- What are your fees? Do you offer sliding scale or payment plans?
- Do you offer free initial phone consultations?

### ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Telehealth for Kids: What Parents Need to Know  
[childmind.org/article/telehealth-for-kids/](https://childmind.org/article/telehealth-for-kids/)

How to Find a Telehealth Provider for Your Child  
[childmind.org/article/how-to-find-a-telehealth-provider-for-your-child/](https://childmind.org/article/how-to-find-a-telehealth-provider-for-your-child/)

**READ THE FULL 2020 CHILDREN'S MENTAL HEALTH REPORT AT [CHILDMIND.ORG/2020REPORT](https://childmind.org/2020report)**

**THE CHILD MIND INSTITUTE** is an independent, national nonprofit dedicated to transforming the lives of children and families struggling with mental health and learning disorders. Our teams work every day to deliver the highest standards of care, advance the science of the developing brain and empower parents, professionals and policymakers to support children when and where they need it most.