

# TELEHEALTH:

## Family Guide to Telehealth for Pediatric Physical Therapy

### **What is Telehealth?**

Telehealth is a way to provide healthcare at a distance. Telehealth includes the use of a device with video and audio capabilities such as a smartphone, tablet, or computer to enable a live, back and forth communication related to your child's healthcare.<sup>1</sup>

Telehealth has become a way for your child to continue to get their needed physical therapy services during the COVID-19 pandemic. Use of telehealth reduces the need to travel and can reduce the risk of catching the virus for you and your child. Telehealth is helpful in other ways, such as allowing your child's therapist to view your home life and to give you specific instructions or suggestions about your child's home exercises, activities, equipment and/or positioning. Telehealth is a great way to work with your therapist, and it is supported by the American Physical Therapy Association.<sup>2,3</sup>

### **How to prepare for a Telehealth session.**

Before your first session, you will have a planning meeting with your therapist to figure out how to best help your child and create goals. The therapist will ask who may be joining the sessions and will determine your comfort with physically helping your child when needed. They will ask about the type(s) of equipment your child may have and will talk to you about the technology you will be using. The therapist will ask for your permission for services to occur using telehealth.

You should plan to have your telehealth therapy session in an area of your home that has space to move or exercise. If possible, your space should be safe and free of distractions so you and your child can focus on the session. You may also want to have some privacy in your space. This may be important if you share your living space with others. Have your child dress comfortably so that s/he can move. Your therapist may ask to see certain parts of your child's body, like your child's shoulders or knees, so tank tops and/or shorts are a good choice.

You may use a laptop, cell phone, or tablet to join a teletherapy session, depending on what you have available. You may need to move your camera during sessions as your child may move around during exercise such as walking; some families find this easiest with a cell phone or tablet. You and your therapist can problem solve the best place for the device and camera and how to move the camera. You will want to place your device in a spot where you can easily view your therapist. You and your child may need to be visible in standing and sitting or lying on the floor.

It is a good idea to practice with your camera and speakers before your visit. This will help make sure your technology is ready so you can focus on working with the therapist. You may need to think about the strength of your Wi-Fi or cellular connection. If your connection is running slow, there may be too many people on your in-home Wi-Fi. If you have poor Wi-Fi connections, you may need to ask others in your home to stop video calls or streaming web content during your telehealth sessions. You may also need to turn off other apps on your device for the best connection.

### **What should I expect during a telehealth session?**

Your telehealth session will be similar to an in-person therapy session. Your therapist will often start by talking about how you and your child are doing. They will then discuss any planned activities for the session. Activities are created to help with your family, school or community related goals.

For young children, the therapist may offer some suggestions to assist with play skills or movement. The therapist may share a video or show the skill or movements using a doll. For older children, the therapist may model the activity and encourage your child to try the activity as well. Your therapist

may also observe your child's performance with household routines, play skills, and/or use of assistive equipment. Your therapist will closely look and listen to how you and your child are responding throughout the session. They will provide time at the end of your session to talk about the positives or difficulties during your time together, and work with you to plan the next session. Although sessions may occasionally have challenges, your therapist should be able to help problem solve any difficulties that may happen. Requests for help during the session are expected, and you should not hesitate to stop the session to brainstorm for solutions. After the session, you may receive a phone call or an email from your therapist with additional ideas, tools, or activities for future session planning.

### **Parent and Physical Therapist Collaboration**

Therapists frequently use a hands-on approach for when working with children in therapy sessions. They may also provide you with a home activity program for you to complete with your child. Without direct physical contact, the role of your therapist is that of a coach. As a coach, the therapist will share their expert knowledge so you can best support your child in achieving their therapy goals.

Your therapist's job is to help you feel comfortable supporting your child with therapy activities. You and your physical therapist will work together to determine specific goals that are most important to you and your family and determine a plan to help you achieve those goals. Your therapist welcomes open communication to increase the usefulness of your session. Therapist coaching will help you think about your child's successes and create solutions for the future. Although it may seem new and different, telehealth has demonstrated improved satisfaction from parents and families regarding their child's development, activity performance, and participation in daily life.<sup>4</sup> (Wallisch et al 2019)

### **How to prepare your child for physical therapy via telehealth.**

Children may have different reactions to meeting with a therapist for a telehealth session. Some children may be nervous and other children may be excited to talk with someone on the smart device. Sometimes older children feel more comfortable online as they may have experience with distance learning. Building a rapport with your child is a very important part of the physical therapist's role in helping your child prepare for telehealth.

Parents can help their child feel more comfortable by explaining why the child is seeing a therapist and by talking about some of the activities they may do during the session. Children who are unfamiliar with telehealth may do well with reading social narrative stories like this [example](#). Working with your child in a telehealth situation may have some challenges at first. Your child could become distracted or respond differently than expected. This is okay! You and your therapist will work together as a team to find the best way to keep your child involved and having fun.

### **References**

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2. APTA, Position on Telehealth HOD P06-19-15-09. Retrieved from: <https://www.apta.org/apta-and-you/leadership-and-governance/policies/telehealth>
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4. Wallisch A, Little L, Pope E, Dunn W. Parent Perspectives of an Occupational Therapy Telehealth Intervention. *Int J Telerehabil*. 2019;11(1):15-22. Published 2019 Jun 12. doi:10.5195/ijt.2019.6274

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Supported by the Practice Committee of APTA Pediatrics. Developed by expert contributors Michele Courtney, PT PhD, Betsy Cyr, PT DPT PCS, Joan Elliott, PT DPT, Sarah Gonsalves, PT DPT, Karin Roback, PT PhD, Michele Wiley, PT DPT DHSc PCS.

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