

# Reopening Considerations for Outpatient Physical Therapists

As outpatient pediatric physical therapists resume face-to-face sessions with children, there are numerous safety considerations for the child and family, as well as the therapist. In addition to guidelines outlined by each individual state and employer, recommendations from organizations such as the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), Occupational Safety & Health Association (OSHA), and the World Health Organization (WHO) provide additional frameworks for clinic re-opening. Employers may provide guidance regarding scheduling, screening, personal protective equipment (PPE), and hygiene; however, there are additional details for therapists to consider to provide safe treatment to children and their families during the pandemic.

## Communication

Clear communication is key to ensuring all safety protocols are understood and followed by all staff who work in a facility; consistency with following guidelines is vital. Recommendations to support communication and consistency of guidelines include:

- Contacting families prior to their visit regarding any new safety measures and restrictions in place
- Offering a hybrid model of telehealth and face to face appointments, if appropriate
- Using signs (in multiple languages) to show one-way entrances/exits, if implemented
- Displaying posters for hand washing procedures, mask wearing practices, social distancing guidelines, and COVID-19 signs/symptoms
- Posting personal protective equipment guidelines/protocols (facility specific) for staff
- Posting reminders for cleaning/sanitizing procedures
- Creating binders with facility specific protocols readily available to staff and patrons
- Creating a tracking document for gloves, gowns, masks, face shields, sanitizer, sanitizing wipes to monitor supply amounts and procedures for re-ordering supplies
- Posting important phone numbers for COVID-19 exposure or questions

## Screening for Staff and Patients

Careful screening is integral to maintaining the health and safety of everyone within the outpatient practice environment; all protocols specific to your place of employment should be developed and consistently followed. Though detection of Covid-19 prior to symptom onset may not be possible, careful and specific questioning can decrease risk of potential exposure. Screening should include:

- Document daily temperature/vital sign checks of all staff in the building (entry/exit)
- Document daily symptoms of all staff in the building – presence/absence of fever, cough, body aches, excessive fatigue, headache, etc. If any symptoms are present, employees should not come to work.
- Document daily contact (exposure to COVID-19 positive individual, self-travel or close contact with others who have travelled, attendance at group gatherings, use of mask in public spaces, etc.)
- Call families to confirm no fevers, illness, or travel to high-risk areas prior to appointment
- Document temperature and contact checks of patients and caregivers (entry)

## **Physical Distancing**

In a busy clinic environment, maintaining physical distance can be challenging. Some children may be unable to wear a mask and cannot be treated at a distance of 6-feet or more. In addition, therapists often need to share spaces during treatment sessions or while completing documentation. To address these challenges, careful collaboration and problem solving is necessary within each clinic setting.

### **Waiting Room**

- Limit number of people accompanying child into the building and/or session
- Space chairs at least 6-feet apart in the waiting room or require families to wait in the car or outside of the building, if possible
- Specify certain doors for entry and exit to manage clinic flow of patients and their families
- Have families check in by calling rather than using a check in desk area within the facility
- Eliminate reading material or toys in waiting room
- Clean/sanitize waiting room at designated times during the day

### **Treatment Spaces**

- Designate rooms or certain treatment areas for therapists on a rotating basis, if possible
- Stagger scheduling to reduce the number of therapists using treatment areas at one time
- Use sign-up sheets for equipment or treatment areas
- Space out equipment within shared treatment spaces, if possible
- Minimize the movement of therapists and patients between spaces within clinic
- Consider outdoor treatment, when possible
- Use plexiglass partitions and tape markings on floor, when appropriate

### **Office/Documentation Areas**

- Avoid shared work areas or maintain 6-feet distance, whenever possible
- Document in unoccupied treatment rooms to avoid use of a common desk area
- Increase space between desks or documentation areas
- Minimize sharing of computers/iPads for documentation
- Set up alternative areas in the building or outdoors for documentation, making calls, etc.
- Use dictation options, when possible
- Limit outside guests, durable medical equipment providers, and vendors

## **Cleaning and Sanitation**

Although each place of employment should have consistent cleaning and sanitation guidelines to minimize risk and spread of COVID-19, actions by individual therapists can help ensure treatment areas and equipment remain adequately sanitized throughout the day.

- Plan for extra time before and between appointments to thoroughly clean treatment areas and allow sanitizer to dry on surfaces
- Use “clean/dirty” bins for toys and smaller items
- Wipe down items on your body such as ID badges with approved sanitizers
- Discourage families from bringing any toys or other items from home
- Carefully follow all instructions on cleaning and disinfectant supplies
- Wear gloves during all sanitation procedures
- Wipe down all surfaces - chairs, benches, doorknobs, light switches, computers, etc. in the room with approved sanitizers

- Frequently sanitize bathroom surfaces
- Use touch free trash cans and thermometers, when possible
- Increase ventilation to clinic areas, whenever possible
- Create guidelines, schedules and documentation and posted forms to be signed for cleaning/sanitation

### **Hygiene and Personal Protective Equipment (PPE)**

Strict adherence to all PPE guidelines for individual places of employment, in addition to frequent and thorough hand washing, will ensure safer practices for therapist, child, and family.

- Consistent use of hand sanitizer when changing rooms
- Have children and anyone accompanying them wash their hands before and after the session as well as after a cough or sneeze
- Encourage masks for children over the age of two
- Use communicator masks, when possible
- Change clothing, if needed during the day, and bag items to be laundered
- Use a cloth mask or surgical mask over a N95 or KN95 mask to maximize the length of use

Safety considerations in outpatient settings should be planned, implemented and overseen by designated staff. Clinic director and designated staff should consult and coordinate activities with local and national public health authorities and guidelines regarding safety considerations.

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