

Telemedicine for Child Collaborative or Integrated Care

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KEYWORDS

- Telemedicine • Telepsychiatry • Consult • Collaborative • Mental health
- Child psychiatry • System of care • Information security

KEY POINTS

- Telemedicine helps collaborative and integrated care systems access specialized child psychiatric resources that may not otherwise be available.
- Telemedicine is a broad field that includes televideo connections between treatment providers, televideo connections between a provider and patient, electronic communication, and telephone connections between providers.
- Technical challenges for telemedicine include addressing the security of both site and signal transmission, quality of connection speed, screen size and position, and reimbursement requirements.
- Telemedicine can be used for child psychiatry access programs, third-party request consult programs, and collaborative and integrated care systems.

INTRODUCTION

Pediatric primary care is a key site for behavioral health disorder detection, care coordination, and treatment. Most families in need of behavioral health care bring their kids to pediatric primary care practices for support, rather than reaching out themselves to the specialty mental health care system. In the United States, about three-quarters of all young people with mental health disorders get care from their primary care providers, whereas the specialty mental health care system ultimately serves less than 1 in 4 children who could benefit from specialty mental health treatment.^{1,2} A continually increasing family and care system request for primary care to deliver the first steps in child mental and behavioral health care has been recognized for more than 2 decades.³

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Abbreviation

CPAP Child psychiatry access program

Primary care providers report that they experience significant difficulties with the referral process, for instance in 1 study only about one-third of providers believed that their patients would frequently follow through on recommendations to seek specialty mental health care.⁴ Unfortunately, for a variety of family, workforce, and insurance reasons, a simple referral out of primary care and into specialty mental health care often means that no care will be delivered. Integrating collaborative mental health care programs right into primary care settings offers an opportunity to ensure a much broader population of children get access to high-quality early detection, assessment, and treatment, which can then meet the “triple aim” of improving care, improving health, and lowering costs of care.⁵

A system of integrated mental health care relies on distributing some degree of new mental health expertise and services into the workflow of primary care practices. However, bringing mental health care expertise into primary care offices presents many challenges; for instance, not every primary care practice should be expected to employ its own mental health experts, available every day under their roof. One way to more flexibly bring mental health services into primary care practices is the use of telemedicine.

Telemedicine is a broad and evolving field, and as such the term telemedicine has received more than 100 different definitions over time in peer-reviewed publications.⁶ In brief, telemedicine can be thought of as the application of medical expertise or services via a remote care delivery or support pathway. An example of a longer but quite inclusive telemedicine definition by the World Health Organization is,

*The delivery of health care services, where distance is a critical factor, by all health care professionals using information and communication technologies for the exchange of valid information for diagnosis, treatment and prevention of disease and injuries, research and evaluation, and for the continuing education of health care providers, all in the interests of advancing the health of individuals and their communities.*⁷

So in the realm of mental health, telemedicine could include telephone based support for practitioners, remotely reviewed patient care interactions, interactive electronic communications, and 2-way live videoconferencing for peer support or patient evaluations (**Box 1**). Telemedicine has been growing in popularity and acceptance within all areas of medicine over the years, particularly for psychiatry. This is because there are a few aspects of psychiatry that lend themselves very well to the use of telemedicine.

Box 1**Some common varieties of telemedicine services**

- Treatment delivery via 2-way interactive televideo
- Patient consultation via 2-way interactive televideo
- Provider care discussions via 2-way interactive televideo
- Collaborative mental health provider support via telephone
- Primary care provider consultation via telephone
- Electronic communication for consultation/collaboration purposes

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