

# Considerations for Conducting Telemental Health with Children and Adolescents



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## KEYWORDS

- Telemental health • Telemedicine • Telepsychiatry • Health information technologies
- Outreach with underserved populations

## KEY POINTS

- Child and adolescent telemental health has been practiced successfully across underserved settings with diverse youth, for most psychiatric disorders, and across development.
- Assessment and treatments have been provided successfully using secure videoconferencing, including pharmacotherapy and psychotherapy.
- Although evidence is emerging concerning the efficacy of telemental health, care should adhere to evidence-based guidelines and best practices set forth by professional organizations.
- Across telemental health clinic start up and implementation, close attention should be given to administrative issues, legal/regulatory considerations (eg, licensure, credentialing, reimbursement, prescribing regulations), and technical support at the teleprovider and patient sites.

## INTRODUCTION

Child mental health disorders are an important public health issue in the United States because of their prevalence, early onset, and impact on the child, family, and community, with an estimated total annual cost of \$247 billion. Approximately 20% of children

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living in the United States experience a mental disorder in a given year, and surveillance during 1994 to 2011 has shown the prevalence of these conditions to be increasing.<sup>1</sup> Despite recent initiatives designed to expand behavioral health services for youth, such as the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act, many children in need of mental health care still do not receive it, receive an inadequate “dose” of sessions, or receive services from local providers without specialty training with children or without training in evidence-based pediatric approaches. Even greater health disparities are seen across geographies and ethnicities.<sup>2</sup>

As part of telemedicine clinical services, telemental health offers an innovative way to address striking access gaps. The umbrella term refers to behavioral and mental health services that are provided via synchronous telecommunications technologies, including discipline-specific applications such as telepsychiatry and telepsychology.<sup>3</sup> Secure videoconferencing technology allows providers and patients/families at different locations to interact in real time and strives to ensure comparable treatment to traditional face-to-face settings. It is a relatively low-cost technology solution because behavioral health interventions largely rely on verbal communication and observation rather than the need for more expensive peripheral devices.<sup>4</sup>

Because youth often have a comfort level and extensive exposure to technologies, telemedicine may be a particularly good fit for this age group. Telemental health saves telemental health providers, or teleproviders, the time and expense of travel and has been extended to both rural and urban settings.<sup>4</sup> There are additional benefits of this telemedicine approach in connecting systems of care and enhancing care coordination. Supervised settings that include a telepresenter, such as clinics, hospitals, primary care practices, schools, daycare facilities, detention centers, and other settings, have been the most frequent sites of connection with youth and have been associated with reimbursement. Unsupervised settings such as homes are increasingly being considered with the expansion of secure videoconferencing over mobile devices. The authors summarize telemental health basics around the *why*, *what*, *when*, *where*, *who*, and *how* associated with safe and effective care.

## WHY DELIVER CHILD TELEMENTAL HEALTH SERVICES?

Telemental health expansion is driven by increasing expectations for high-quality behavioral health services across geographies. Telemental health is further advanced by the decreasing cost of secure videoconferencing options and increasing access to high-speed connectivity. Health care reform has increased interest in creative solutions to increase access to behavioral health services due to access challenges associated with the shortages of youth behavioral health specialists, a maldistribution of available specialists, a shrinking behavioral health specialist workforce, and instability in behavioral health funding.<sup>5</sup> Rural and frontier communities are particularly hard hit with access difficulties because of shrinking populations, declining economies, and increasing poverty as well as delays in treatment, less access to mental health insurance, and limited transportation options.<sup>6,7</sup> The burdens of traveling for services are often magnified, with the frequent standard of care for regular sessions sustained over a period of time.

Patients and families report several reasons for participating in telemental health, and as with most telemedicine specialties, report high satisfaction with telemental health.<sup>8</sup> These reasons include the following:

1. Conveniently finding high-quality services close to home;
2. Decreasing time away from both work and school;
3. Decreasing costs associated with traveling miles for care;

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