

Guide for Clinicians Conducting Telehealth with Children During Covid-19 Crisis

- Facilitating a sense of predictability and security
 - o Kids have had so many changes happen very suddenly over the past couple of weeks and we know that loss of consistency and predictability can be very stressful
 - o Use your sessions, in part, as a way to provide some measure of normalcy and routine continuity to your patients (e.g., if you used to have a routine in the office of starting every session with a check in about the week, or always starting with a mindfulness exercise, try to keep the format of your sessions familiar, even on this new platform)
 - o Address the changes and make space for patients to think about what is going to be different about therapy, but also about what things will remain the same (e.g., you'll still see me every week; we'll still talk about your worries/big feelings/troubles; your parent will still check in with me so they can help support you; we can still draw together)
 - o Set up a spot in your home where your laptop can be propped the same way/with the same view of you and same background for each session, if feasible, to maintain the consistency of you and your space each time the child "comes" to see you.
 - Be mindful of the background, minimizing personal items within view to maximize your capacity to remain a neutral figure. Try to place yourself in front of a wall, rather than with a full view of a room behind you.
 - Make sure your computer/camera can be propped at an angle that is approximately eye-level and so that your hands are free to be drawing, gesturing, feel like you're in a normal therapy setting
 - Ensure that your laptop is plugged in or well-charged
 - Think about lighting and discuss this with your patient's as well (e.g., pt should not be in a dark room where you cannot fully assess them)
 - Review confidentiality with the patient, and set things up as best you can to minimize breaches of confidentiality in your home environment (e.g., would your neighbors, spouses, children be able to hear session content, and is there a way to minimize this)
 - Many of the "telemental health 101" type resources online focus on practical issues and so have information that is fairly irrelevant for right now, given so many laws have been waived during this crisis.
- Embracing the strange new features of this modality of treatment
 - o If a child is excited to introduce you to a favorite toy or show you their space, this is okay and can be fun/feel very intimate for both child and therapist, however try to also maintain sessions with you as separate or different from video chats they may have with their grandparent or peer from school (e.g., "it seems like it feels so special to show me your room--we can do that for 5 minutes, and then let's make sure we can have our time just like we do in my office")
 - o Find out from parent or child about the 'tools' a child has so that you can be prepared for how to engage them in therapeutic activities (e.g., does the child have their own Uno deck so that you could each have a deck on either side of the screen and play virtually? Does the child have easy access to drawing supplies? A room in which they can have sessions be relatively private? Open space in which to take body breaks or practice body relaxation techniques?)

- Ideas for activities to use during therapy in web-chat format
 - o For our older adolescents who are more able to engage in talk therapy, this may feel like a relatively simple transition. For younger kids or kids with difficulty engaging, the loss of shared engagement in a game or activity can make it feel very difficult to keep a child invested in treatment.
 - o Drawing “together”: You and patient can still do drawing activities across the screen
 - § Guided imagery for relaxation/somatic coping – “Let’s each draw a picture of our special/favorite/comfortable place” then coach child through describing the picture in great detail before showing you (e.g., “tell me all about it so I can see it too. What does it smell like there, what does it sound like, who else is there, how does it feel to be there, what do you feel in your body when you are there”)
 - § Drawing pictures of thoughts, worries, things child is confused about, which can be shown and described to clinician via webcam and used as a platform for conversation
 - § For older kids who have done well with the cognitive triangle (e.g., thoughts, feelings, behaviors, in visual format), this is a particularly useful CBT tool that can be done via drawing over webcam (each drawing/writing it simultaneously) to use in situations in which kids are feeling anxious about new information (see primer at end of this guide)
 - § CBT practice for younger kids (e.g., practice with using the cognitive triangle, to then apply to their own thoughts/feelings/behaviors): app called “TriangleofLife” has a game-like teaching tool for CBT in a cool jungle setting....could be something child and clinician are looking at simultaneously. Or just helpful as inspiration for you re: developmentally downgrading these concepts!
 - § Art project together to draw/make a pretend flower and a pretend candle for controlled breathing (e.g., breath in through your nose like you’re smelling a flower; breath out through your mouth like you’re blowing out a candle)
 - o Practicing/teaching somatic coping skills via webcam—more didactic content might be particularly feasible via this modality, and particularly useful during this time of stress!
 - § Making a plan for what to do for a “body break” if feeling cooped up or needing to get energy out (e.g., jumping jacks, dance party)
 - § Teach progressive muscle relaxation to cope with anxiety/heart racing/shortness of breath when anxious (not if SOB is due to covid ;) , and plan together for when/how child could use this. There are lots of great scripts for children online. Here’s one of my favorites:
<https://depts.washington.edu/hcsats/PDF/TF-%20CBT/pages/4%20Emotion%20Regulation%20Skills/Client%20Handouts/Relaxation/Relaxation%20Script%20for%20Younger%20Children.pdf>
 - § Teach diaphragmatic breathing/controlled breathing/belly breathing
 Some favorite resources for this include:
 For adults/adolescents:
<https://my.clevelandclinic.org/health/articles/9445-diaphragmatic-breathing>
 For school-aged kids: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_xQJ2O4b5TM
https://www.anxietycanada.com/sites/default/files/calm_breathing.pdf
 For young kids: “lie down, put a stuffed animal on your belly, breath in deeply through your nose and try to put allllll the air in your belly so your stuffed animal goes up, then push all the air out

of your belly through your mouth and watch your stuffed animal go down again.”

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_mZbzDOpyIA&t=63s

§ Guided imagery as described above

§ Apps for mindfulness or breathing practice with kids:

- Smiling Mind: has really lovely meditations and mindfulness activities targeted to specific age groups across the lifespan

- Breathe Kids

- Calm

- o Play via webcam

§ This one is probably more difficult and requires some creativity, but if you can talk with parent ahead of time to identify a few toys that are relatively neutral (e.g., not a named superhero or identifiable character) that child can use to show you a story about, for instance, “a family that’s all stuck together in the house” and you can facilitate child playing out what might happen among the characters, and adding in your own story stems “oops, now the brother dinosaur came into the room where all the family members were and he’s feeling mad...what do you think is going to happen?”

§ More structured play: if you have a deck of cards and child does too, think about ways you could continue to play a card game, or that you could identify a topic that goes with each specific number...like if you’re playing some version of go fish (or something more sophisticated), every time a 3 comes up, child names something that’s been hard about staying home and brief discussion ensues, etc, as you might do with games in your office.

§ I think this is hardest because we aren’t likely to have toys or games in our homes, and children don’t necessarily have toys/games that we would think of as usable for some therapeutic purpose. But this is also a chance for creativity and use of ‘found objects’.

This guide will be a living document over the next several weeks. If you have other ideas, or if you try something that’s really successful and would be helpful to share with others, please send me a summary and I’ll continue to update the guide.

This way of conducting treatment is a new skill that we’re all developing and trying to master very quickly—it may be rocky at first, but you’re doing great!!

CBT Primer for Use During Covid-19:

An example:

Work with the child to list the thoughts, feelings, behaviors/actions that the child is experiencing in the context of the situation that they identify:

- o situation: school shut down for a virus

- o thought: “My friends will get sick and I’ll never see them again”

- o feelings: scared, lonely, sad

- o behaviors/actions: cry, isolate, heart beating fast, stomach tightening

Help them visualize this (based on child’s developmental level) with the cognitive triangle

Together, identify ways you could interrupt each of the depicted arrows

- Could the situation be mitigated? (e.g., if the situation is based on too much information coming at them from the news, maybe they could talk with parent about parent only watching news while child is in another room)
- What are some more helpful thoughts the child could generate, and how would thinking those new thoughts impact the other corners of the triangle? (e.g., helpful thoughts like: “we know that kids aren’t getting very sick” “I talked to my friend this morning and they were doing fine” “even if someone gets sick, I’ll know about it and be able to facetime with them and see that they’re okay”)
- What are some behaviors they could do, or ways they could calm their body reactions down? How would doing those behaviors/the experience of feeling better somatically impact their thoughts and feelings? (e.g., “I could make sure I’m with my siblings instead of by myself” “I could use controlled diaphragmatic breathing/belly breathing to slow down my racing heart or to help me breath more comfortably”)

Recommended:

YouTube video How to Practice Belly Breathing - Nemours Children's Health System

YouTube video Sesame Street: Common and Colbie Caillat - "Belly Breathe" with Elmo