

## Teletherapy: What is it, and does it work?

What is Teletherapy? Teletherapy is defined as the process of using technology to provide mental health services remotely. Teletherapy can include phone calls, texts, and online video therapy through apps and such as Facetime, Skype and Zoom.

Is teletherapy confidential? Any communication between therapist and client that occurs outside of a private office is subject to breaches of confidentiality. However, many apps provide end-to-end encryption which prevents even the technology company from monitoring communication. In my practice, I use either Zoom for Healthcare or FaceTime which are encrypted and HIPPA compliant.

Is telehealth covered by insurance? Many insurance providers will reimburse at a similar rate as in-person sessions, but you should check with your provider to be sure.

Is teletherapy as effective as in-office therapy? In a word. Yes. Hundreds of [studies](#) provide a robust evidence base showing similar levels of efficacy, patient satisfaction, reliability, treatment outcomes, and cost effectiveness when teletherapy is compared to face-to-face psychotherapy.

I have been doing family teletherapy since 2020 and can verify that family teletherapy (which includes both family and parent-only sessions) is as effective as in-office sessions. Client satisfaction remains high and work toward therapy goals remains very productive through teletherapy.

What are the benefits of teletherapy? Positive aspects of teletherapy include increased flexibility in scheduling and attendance—as parents and children can connect from multiple locations and don't have to spend several hours commuting to and from an office appointment. Teletherapy also provides increased continuity due to clients' ability to continue sessions during inclement weather, illness/injury, or when families are away traveling. Teletherapy has also allowed me to offer shorter 30-minute sessions, which are working very well for younger and more active children. My experience has also been that children find increased comfort from meeting through video session and are less intimidated when they are able to meet from the familiarity and safety of their own home vs being taken to a professional office.

What are the downsides? The main difficulty I've encountered is with technological limitations, such as Wi-Fi connection issues and poor audio quality. I am now on a stable direct-cable connection but clients do occasionally have Wi-Fi disruptions and so FaceTime or audio calls are used as back up. Another issue that I've see is that some children become distracted by their own image, so parents at times have to remove the reflection image on their screen. Lastly, since we are not meeting in an office with toys and games, parents have increased responsibility for creating structure for the sessions i.e. in-view seating, fidgets for restlessness, clear expectations for behavior, rewards for participation, etc.

If you are going to participate family teletherapy, here are some tips for the best possible experience:

- Meet in a room with a strong, stable Wi-Fi signal.
- Keep the camera as close as possible while capturing everyone in frame.
- Sit in a quiet location and have siblings and pets occupied.
- Try not to sit in front of a window. Backlight makes faces hard to see. If you need to sit in front of a window, close shades/curtains to improve facial lighting.
- Turn off self-view and zoom backgrounds to limit distractions for the child.
- Seat the child between parents and encourage them to speak in a loud and clear voice.
- Turn off text alerts on your device, so sounds and incoming texts don't pop up on your zoom screen.
- If you're on a laptop that has a background noise filter—turn it off. Noise filters tend to make the microphone too directional (pick up only the voice directly in front and silence those to the side).
- Provide active children with energy outlets during sessions i.e. fidgets, gum, doodle pad, ice water, ability to stand, yoga ball to sit on, etc. The best outlets allow for some movement but are not too distracting for the child.
- Use incentives or rewards for good effort and participation.
- Have a backup plan. If you can't connect or your Wi-Fi goes out, have a plan in place to connect through FaceTime or audio call.

Teletherapy has been used for decades by psychotherapists. However, it did not enter the mainstream of mental health treatment until the Covid pandemic. Since then, many therapists have devoted all or part of their practice to teletherapy and find that it is working very well. I have found it to be equally effective for family therapy and parent support work, with some aspects (like scheduling flexibility) superior when compared to traditional in-office visits.

Like many things, the decision to participate in telehealth vs in-office psychotherapy depends also on the preference and needs of the client. Clients should discuss concerns with the therapist specific to their child's individual temperament and goals for therapy to decide which type of therapy work is best suited for them.