E-Learning. “Guidance/Support Services.” Telepractice. Teletherapy. Telemedicine. Remote learning. Online learning. Digital learning. Virtual therapy. Aaaaah! No matter what you call it, everyone is talking about it… and for good reason. Increasingly, our field of speech-language pathology is presented with the opportunity to use technology to enhance our intervention. Sometimes, this process will seem like we are opening up an exciting new world, filled with great benefits for our students. Other times, this will involve a scary step into a great unknown. Fortunately, many clinicians have already made the transition to telepractice, so you can learn from their experiences as you explore the new possibilities that you are facing. Here are several thoughts to help you get started:

Understand your district guidance

At this time, how your district is dealing with E-Learning is going to shape your role. Do your best to be aware of district mandates and what they are telling parents about your services in E-Learning.

Understand your ASHA ethics and state licensure requirements

Be aware that Medicaid billing, licensing requirements, and ethical considerations for telepractice have nuances in teletherapy vs. in-person therapy, so be sure to work with your SLP leads, coordinators and administrators to make certain these differences are taken into consideration.

Connect with your Students and Parents

Your district already has privacy policies that explain how you will maintain student confidentiality. You can use these or expand them to cover telepractice. Remember that remote services will be new for your students and families, too, so be sure to explain to them how you will ensure that they (and their records) are protected even when you work with them via the Internet.

Think about the features of online platforms available to you

Some online platforms have advanced features, such as built-in apps, screen-sharing, recording, chats, multiple windows, and whiteboards, that can help you make your therapy more interactive. You might not need these as you are first starting, but over time you will find ways to increase your student’s (and your own) engagement in therapy through the use of these tools.

Headphones: Better is really better

Although many people can do videoconferencing just fine with regular ear buds, speech-language pathologists are special. We really need to hear our students clearly—and they need to hear us. There really is a difference in high-quality headphones. The technology is so good these days that you don’t have to break the bank, but definitely step up from the earbuds that came with your phone.

Familiarize yourself with the software before trying it with your students

Call a friend or family member and play around with the various features in your online platform before you try to use them with your students. You don’t want to introduce any additional confusion for your students. Remember, this may the first time for them to use this type of technology. The more you practice, the more prepared you will be to help them troubleshoot when they run into trouble.
You don’t really need much technical know-how!

Modern telepractice systems take care of the details for you. A good one will give you a solid platform for providing therapy that will allow you to focus on your client, not the technology. The less computer-savvy you are, the more valuable a full-service platform will be. You don’t want to spend your time trying to figure out the computer when what you need to be doing is helping your students.

Start each new student/family with a tour

Start your first session with a tour of the telepractice environment. Orient your students to what they are seeing on their screen. Explain to them what to do if the image freeze or the video is choppy. Help them find the chat window, so they can type questions to you if they are having trouble. Show them what you see on your screen. Consider preparing a “cheat sheet” for them listing procedures for starting and ending sessions, checking their audio and video signals, and how to contact you if they are stuck.

You don’t have to reinvent the wheel…

Nearly everything you do in in-person therapy can be adapted to telepractice. There are some exceptions (particularly some that are very relevant to stuttering therapy—we address those in another practical tip). Still, most of what you do in the therapy room can be done via the computer: modeling, feedback, reinforcements, rewards, data collection, games, and more—all can be adapted with a bit of creativity. It might not be exactly the way that you and your students are accustomed to, but you’ll find that there are good ways to bridge the gap, so you can rely on your existing knowledge and strategies to help your students.

Acknowledge that some aspects of therapy will need to change

Even though you can do a really good approximation of in-person therapy via an online platform, there are indeed some aspects of therapy that will need to change. Explain this to your students and their families, acknowledge that you will be doing everything that you can to give them the best therapy possible, and work together with your students to overcome the barriers.

Rely upon your resources

As noted above, many clinicians have already paved the way. ASHA has even put together a practice portal specifically focused on telepractice: https://www.asha.org/Practice-Portal/Professional-Issues/Telepractice/ Use this and other resources, such as your state licensing board and state association websites, to get accurate information about telepractice.

One of your best sources of information about telepractice and stuttering is us! Stuttering Therapy Resources will be posting more information to help you help people who stutter, so be sure to follow us on all of our social media channels and check our website often: https://www.StutteringTherapyResources.com.

Remember that YOU CAN DO IT!

Probably the most important thing to keep in mind as you approach telepractice for stuttering (or any other condition) is that you can do it. Remember that you already have the clinical skills you need; all you are doing is adapting the delivery format. Certainly, you will learn new tricks as you gain experience with the online format, but the fundamentals of stuttering therapy are the same, regardless of the delivery method. (We cover those fundamentals in detail in another Practical Tip.)

Keeping these thoughts in mind, you will find that you can help your students achieve their goals, whether in person or via the Internet. Whether you’re doing this by choice or by necessity, give it a try, and you may even come to appreciate some of the unique benefits that telepractice has to offer!