Over the course of the COVID-19 pandemic, therapists have had to transition their services online and adapt interventions for their clients on the autism spectrum. Below are some tips to remember and incorporate before, during and after sessions that can promote positive outcomes.

**BEFORE SESSIONS**

**SETTING UP**

- Free your background from any personal items
  - Try using a virtual background or blur effect!
- Consider how you want to present yourself during the pandemic
  - What view of your room do you want your client to have
  - How much you want to share about yourself
- Use earphones for privacy

**ORIENTATION**

- Ensure that your client(s) is in a safe and private space in their home
- Provide a program overview
  - Review attendance policies
  - Set expectations for participation

**SETTING UP**

- Sit back at a distance from your camera
  - Mimic the view your client(s) would have of you in person
- Create unique and password-protected meeting links for each session

**A WORD ABOUT TECHNOLOGY**

Give your client(s) detailed instructions for technology use and discuss preferred methods and frequency of communication

*Zoom Tutorials* → *Click Here!*

**ORIENTATION**

- Plan in advance for technological disruptions
  - Have a backup phone number on hand in case you get disconnected
- Be patient
  - Provide ample guidance and reassurance about technology use
**BUILDING RAPPORT**

- Attend to non-verbal cues throughout the session
  - Tone of voice
  - Changes in energy level
- Individualize sessions for each client
  - Talk about their interests
  - Reference things they have previously mentioned
  - Allow screen-sharing

**With Children**

Use themed virtual backgrounds and/or personal items that they like (for example, pets, toys, games)

**PREVENTING CHALLENGING BEHAVIOURS**

- Offer frequent breaks and the freedom to have a "safe word" for when the client wants a break
- Allow your client to engage in self-regulatory behaviours (such as stimming)
- Offer verbal praise and other incentives for completing tasks

**MAINTAINING THERAPEUTIC ALLIANCE**

- Show flexibility in session
  - Reschedule
  - Reorder activities
  - Shorten sessions
  - Assign homework

Some clients may be spending most of their day online and view therapy as added screen time

**With Children**

Support parents in a co-facilitation role to help their child re-focus and monitor challenging behaviours

**BUILDING RAPPORT**

- Understand and accommodate your clients' communication needs
  - Allow them to turn off their video, walk around, or stim
- Let them take the lead and respond accordingly
- Consider incorporating check-ins
  - You can create a fun scale and ask your client(s) to rate how they are feeling that day

**MAINTAINING THERAPEUTIC ALLIANCE**

- Maintain structure and consistency
  - Weekly email reminders
  - Regular debrief sessions
  - Keep within agreed-upon start and end times
- Incorporate visual cues when possible
  - Images/videos to aid explanations
  - Objects to accompany verbal demonstrations
  - Visual timers, schedules and/or calendars

**PREVENTING CHALLENGING BEHAVIOURS**

- Offer frequent breaks and the freedom to have a "safe word" for when the client wants a break
- Allow your client to engage in self-regulatory behaviours (such as stimming)
- Offer verbal praise and other incentives for completing tasks
If applicable, offer and/or receive feedback from your client(s) regarding their experience with online therapy.

Reflect on what worked and what did not:

- Think about the therapy itself
- Think about online delivery specifically
- What changes can you make?

Send out exit surveys after program completion to evaluate the experiences and needs of your clientele.

SOURCE:


Thank you to the Sinneave Family Foundation whose staff consulted with us on this knowledge translation initiative and who supported this work.

Developmental Disabilities and Mental Health Lab at York University