Telehealth for Transition Age Youth and Young Adults

Privacy, Emotional Safety and Welfare During Covid-19 and Beyond

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The past few months have seen a boom in the use of telehealth for providing mental health services as agencies and providers rapidly adapt to the challenges posed by the Covid-19 pandemic. Along with this has come a proliferation of guidance documents and tip sheets on responsibly engaging clients in telehealth.

Much of this guidance has focused on technical aspects of privacy and confidentiality – which telehealth platforms are most secure, necessary disclaimers, how to update informed consent[1] –or focused mainly on issues specific to providing telehealth services to either younger children or adults, covering topics such as how to keep young clients focused and engaged in virtual sessions[2,3,4,5] and reminding adult clients to find a quiet, private space for conversations with their providers.[6]

Guidance for doing telehealth with the transition-age youth population has been relatively limited. Although these young people may be quite receptive to using telehealth technology, many of them have concerns around privacy. For instance, some youth may have been receiving mental health services without their parents' knowledge. (In many states, young people can choose to receive mental health services starting at age 14, 15 or 16, without the consent of their guardian.) Other young people may be worried about being overheard speaking about topics they would rather keep private from their caregivers, and possible consequences should they be overheard. As several publications have recently noted, this may be of particular concern for young people who are LGBT+ and have friction with their parents or guardians related to their identity.[7,8,9]

The tips that follow provide options for protecting the emotional safety, privacy and welfare of transition-age youth and young adults while they are participating in virtual mental health care. These were compiled over the course of several conversations with providers currently working with this population, including youth peer support specialists, clinicians, and supervisors. This list is intended as a starting point as services evolve to meet the challenges of this new era.

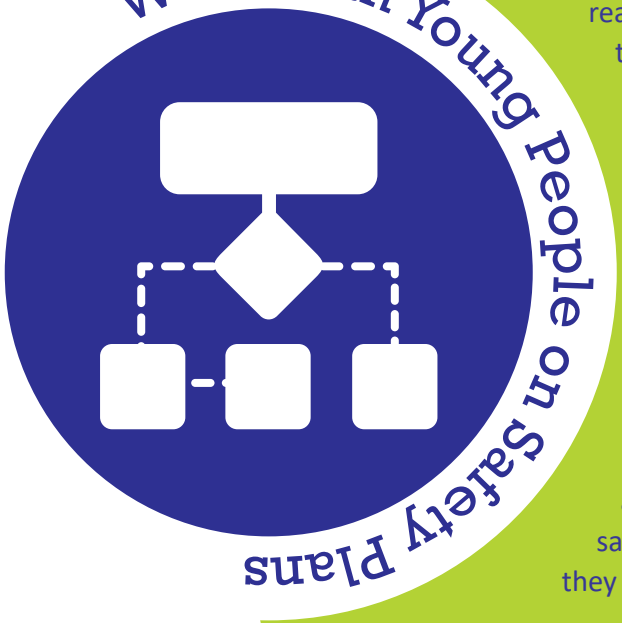
Address Privacy Concerns

As a provider, show the young person you are working with that you are in a secure and private location: give them a view of your office or workspace, use white noise outside your door if able, and address any concerns the young person might have.

For young people with concerns about being overheard, work with them to identify solutions that will make them feel most safe and comfortable. Some that have been used:

- Speaking with provider over the phone or on video chat while going for a walk outside of the home
- Having a virtual session with provider from a car
- Using a "chat" or text function in telehealth for sensitive topics
- Having a code word to indicate to their provider that they are no longer alone

Work with Young People on Safety Plans



Work with young people who are worried about being overheard or discovered receiving services to have a contingency or safety plan ready; for example, what might happen if their parents were to overhear something? What precautions would they need to have in place? Talking through these concerns, and having a plan in place, will help youth feel prepared and may relieve some anxieties.

Providers should maintain awareness of any underlying safety concerns for young people, including the existence of or potential for abuse. Young people who are LGBT+ may be particularly vulnerable to abuse at this time. Work with young people to have adjusted safety plans in place and be aware of resources or supports they can access should their living situations become unsafe.

Make Adjustments for Team Planning

For young people involved in team planning processes, such as Wraparound, work with them to prepare for their meetings in these changed circumstances.

- Some young people may feel less comfortable advocating for themselves while calling into a meeting from the same location as their parent or guardian. If you are the young person's youth partner or care coordinator, work with them to determine if this is an issue and how you can support them.
- It may also be more productive and/or comfortable to have parents and young people call into meetings from different rooms, when feasible.

Features like Zoom's virtual backgrounds might make young people feel more comfortable (for instance, young people from low income backgrounds or youth who simply feel uncomfortable revealing their living space) in group situations like support or therapy groups. Facilitators may consider asking everyone in a group to use a Zoom background as an equity measure.

Identify Online Spaces and Communities

For young people, online spaces may already provide a source of community. Providers can assist young people in identifying where they can go online to access safety, connection, and support. Some possible resources:

- Trevor Project: https://www.thetrevorproject.org
  (Talk and text crisis hotlines, and Trevorspace, virtual community)
- Q Chat Space: https://www.qchatspace.org
  (Online support groups for LGBT+ youth)
- Teen Talk App: https://teenlineonline.org
  (To get the Teen Talk App, text TEEN to 839863)
- Crisis Text Line: https://www.crisistextline.org
  (Text HOME to 741741 to connect with a trained crisis counselor)

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