



The Case for Telepractice: Should Hanen programs be offered to families online?

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With an increase in early intervention referrals, many of us find ourselves under pressure to do more with less; less time to see an increasing number of clients, less staff to meet the growing need, and yet the same necessity to deliver high-quality early intervention. As more and more healthcare professionals move towards integrating online practices, it's time to think about how technology can work for us!

What is “Telepractice”?

Telepractice or telehealth refers to the **delivery of professional services through telecommunications technology such as two-way video conferencing online** (CASLPO, 2014). Some of you may already be offering individual therapy through telepractice, but have you ever considered running a Hanen program remotely?

There are several apparent advantages to doing so:

- **Time savings:** parents and therapists alike will save time and money on travel
- **Cost savings:** organizations may be more willing to run Hanen programs in the absence of physical space requirements and the cost of materials (e.g. flip chart, hard copies of resources, projector, name tags, beverages, etc.)
- **Improved access:** individuals in rural areas (or anywhere, really!) can easily access services with a working internet connection
- **Flexibility:** we can provide services outside of a clinic setting which may allow for more flexible business hours that better accommodate families. Rescheduling individual visits if needed would be much simpler
- **Parent commitment:** families may be more inclined to commit to a program offered exclusively within the comfort of their own home
- **Efficiency:** we can service an increased number of clients and families

But is telepractice really as good as traditional in-person intervention? Can the quality of clinical practice really be maintained when delivered electronically? One study aimed to answer these questions.

The Study

- Hedda Maedan and colleagues investigated the effectiveness of Internet-Based Parent-Implemented Communication Strategies (i-PiCS) for young children with autism
- Participants (3 mother-child dyads) were provided with an overview of social communication, handouts regarding parent strategies, face-to-face training over Skype, and video feedback of parent-child interactions over the course of 3.5 months

Results

- While there was some variability between families, **parents learned to effectively implement the targeted naturalistic strategies when they were trained over Skype**
- **All children were observed to make positive changes following this intervention**
- Parents' ability to maintain their skills was lower than at the time of intervention, but higher than at baseline
- All parents indicated satisfaction with i-PiCS
- An additional study out of the University of Western Washington found similarly promising results. Parent coaching strategies that were delivered to 2 families remotely via telepractice lead to gains that were maintained, and even exceeded that of traditionally delivered therapy for children with ASD (Baharav & Reiser, 2010).

Bottom Line

Early studies indicate it's **the type of therapy, not the medium with which it is delivered that makes it successful**. Significant to these positive results was that thorough face-to-face instruction using evidence-based parent coaching strategies were provided. Future studies looking at a larger sample size and more variable participant demographics will be important for generalizing these findings.

Clinical Implications at a Glance

These studies support the idea that moving from in-person to online intervention does not pose a threat to our clinical outcomes so long as important features of intervention are maintained:

- **Live face-to-face instruction**
- **Thorough review of the teaching materials**
- **Seeing strategies being implemented** (i.e. by another parent or therapist)
- **Parents creating an action plan for their children within daily routines**
- **Ongoing feedback provided to parents at regular intervals**

Potential Drawbacks and Considerations

With any innovation, there are potential drawbacks. We must therefore take into account some important factors:

- Telepractice relies on the internet to work – creating a troubleshooting protocol may need to be established with families ahead of time
- It is our responsibility to ensure confidentiality is maintained when offering services online (see links to CASLPO/ASHA position statements on telepractice in the references)

While early studies point to high parent satisfaction with online delivery of intervention, the biggest obstacle may be a potential reluctance to take on or participate in a new approach. Despite any perceived drawbacks, **by adapting to include telepractice, we can make services more accessible to our clients, not to mention maximize our own efficiencies!**

Telepractice and Hanen

Teaching parents to implement naturalistic strategies that facilitate parent-child communication and interaction is at the heart of Hanen's philosophy. We know that to effectively teach these skills, we must acknowledge different adult learning styles and incorporate ways to:

- present information clearly
- help parents to personalize Hanen strategies as these relate to their child
- have parents create plans and practice implementation
- provide face-to-face feedback and personalized coaching from a trained clinician

These are all factors that have yielded successful results in early research looking at parent coaching via telepractice. This is very promising as Hanen begins to explore innovative models of delivering therapy. Stay tuned for further updates to see how Hanen plans to expand its clinical reach through the use of technology

References

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About The Hanen Centre

Founded in 1975, The Hanen Centre is a Canadian not-for-profit charitable organization with a global reach. Its mission is to provide parents, caregivers, early childhood educators and speech-language pathologists with the knowledge and training they need to help young children develop the best possible language, social and literacy skills. This includes children who have or are at risk for language delays, those with developmental challenges such as autism, and those who are developing typically.

For more information, please visit www.hanen.org.

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