

Episode: 11**Title: Telehealth in Paediatric OT: Benefits and Barriers****Hosts: Mahek Bansal & Larissa Ferrari****Mahek Bansal**

Hi everyone. Welcome back to the New PossibilOTs podcast. Larissa and I are super excited to be back with you for episode eleven. Today we thought it would be great to talk about telehealth. So telehealth is a really big subject, especially in the world of OT and with recent world events that have happened. So I guess Larissa and I will be talking specifically about telehealth in paediatrics and the benefits, the barriers, how we sort of navigate the use of telehealth in paediatrics specifically. And we hope to follow this up with a second episode of some practical tips and strategies of how we set up telehealth sessions, resources that we use, the different video conferencing platforms, things like that. So today we hope to give a bit of a background and see how we go. So Larissa, maybe you could start with how you use telehealth in your practice.

Larissa Ferrari

Okay, so as we've mentioned before, we are in a clinic, so of course most of our clients come to see us to in person sessions. However, we do have some telehealth sessions and we might have them like regularly, but we also might have some telehealth sessions randomly when needed. So this is when we have a rural client. So someone living far away from us that cannot access any OT in their area or for some other reasons, for example, when someone cannot bring them to the session or for any reason, they cannot be present on that day, but they're still able and available to do an OT session with us. So these might be the possible reasons why we have telehealth sessions in the clinic. Did I miss anything Mahek?

Mahek Bansal

No, I think you've got it. And I think the only other time that we consistently use telehealth is for our parent planning sessions as well, which we've talked about in previous episodes when we sit down with parents before starting the OT process. Telehealth just makes it a little bit more accessible to have those type of meetings.

Larissa Ferrari

So now that we gave a little bit of a feedback of when we do telehealth sessions in our practice, maybe we could start by thinking of the benefits of telehealth, not only in a setting like ours, but also for people that mainly do telehealth sessions in their practice. Would you like to start with the first one Mahek?

Mahek Bansal

Yes. One of the main benefits for me and something we've talked about in previous episodes in the community based OT is that telehealth is another way that we can support a client in their natural environment. So when we're doing sessions over telehealth, the clients at home, or maybe they're at school or in the community, we can see them in their natural environment, but also, we can do our intervention with

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them in their natural environment. So especially if we're doing self-care related goals, then we can practice those things in the way that they would do it every single day.

And that has a lot of benefits because the ability of being able to then translate those skills and what we're working on into their everyday routine becomes so much simpler because we're already doing it in that environment rather than doing it in a clinic and then trying to adapt that to home.

Larissa Ferrari

Mahek! That was also my number one benefit. Just so everyone knows, we don't tell each other what we're going to talk about, just the main topic. And that was also my number one benefit as well, just to observe the client in their natural environment and to observe how the things are in the home environment. I don't know about you Mahek, but sometimes when I have in person sessions, we get the parents to describe the routine or the client and then we kind of have to imagine the setting, like what's the bathroom look like, or we can ask for photos, but we're relying on someone to translate that to us.

Whereas when we do the telehealth session, we not only see the client performing the tasks, but we actually see the environment and the possibilities of that environment or if there's anything we could adapt or adjust to support the participation and things like that. So that was also my number one benefit.

Mahek Bansal

Glad to hear we're on the same page, Larissa. And I think that also helps us, like you said, visualising the environment and seeing exactly what it looks like, how it's set up means that the strategies and suggestions that we're making can be right from the start, be individualized more to that client situation. Whereas usually we talk about it and it still is a trial and error process, but usually when it's in the clinic, we talk about it with parents of being I'm going to try and suggest things. You try them, adapt them, modify them to how it works for you, let me know how it goes, and then we'll go from there.

But it means that there's a lot of this back and forth problem solving but having that idea of that natural environment already makes it so much easier for us as well to make sure that we are being individualistic to what's going to work for this family.

Larissa Ferrari

Totally agree. So then I'm going to move on to my second benefit on my list. I think that is just to be able to reach that community that is in a rural area or in an area that because, just so we can give a background for people who do not live in Australia, OT is in high demand, so we do have waitlists, I think throughout the whole country. So it might be that the person is not in a rural area, but they just cannot access an OT service due to the waitlist.

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So to reach this community, and these people, and to be able to provide service to them, I think that's my second greatest benefit, just to be able to support those families, the community, in addition to the benefit number one we've mentioned before, to be able to observe them in their natural environment. And even though the client might not benefit from direct telehealth intervention, there's always room to work with the main carers. So the parents or someone in the family or someone that provides that one to one support in their life.

Mahek Bansal

Larissa I think you've stolen my list because those were my next two benefits, the accessibility and working within a family unit. So I guess I'll keep talking about those. I 100% agree. I think that accessibility for health services generally, and of course, OT is such a big area and such a barrier for so many people, and telehealth opens up so many of those opportunities. It's also not just accessibility in that sense. It's also travel, it's also time. There are OTs who work rurally, but for them to travel and the cost that a client is paying for the OT to travel to them is also needing to be considered, which is quite easily mitigated in a telehealth approach. So I think we are, as you said, just being able to provide services to those who need it.

Of course, waitlists are still a thing, and it makes it really challenging. But wherever we can provide services in the most accessible ways and equitable ways, that's what we want to do. That's why we do what we do. And as you said, being able to work within the family unit. So I think that comes sort of hand in hand with being in the natural setting through telehealth is then also you're having access not just to this client, but to how the whole family works together and you can support the family. So whether that's having one on one intervention with the client over telehealth or then doing some parent coaching sessions or working with the family as a whole, working within siblings, things like that, I think telehealth, opens the doors for you to get a bit of a glimpse of the family life, which gives you opportunity then to support the different members of the family and how this family dynamic runs.

Larissa Ferrari

Okay, as we are very synced. Parent coaching was my third one, so I'll just move on to the fourth one because I'll talk again about parent coaching in one of my barriers, as we already have almost the same list, without knowing, I'll just let you know that will be again in my barriers, but I'll move on to the fourth one. So the fourth benefit for me is what COVID taught us. So if there's any reason why this client cannot leave the home environment. It could be through a pandemic situation or maybe the main carers are sick and they cannot leave the house or they cannot access us because that person is not available.

Or even if they can't come because they have, for example, COVID or if they have any other flu symptoms but they are not actually feeling they cannot engage with the

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session, they feel good, they just have the symptoms, but that is preventing them to access the in-person service. We can always use that telehealth as an option. And as I've mentioned before, this is something we do here. So the client is able to participate, they are happy to, carers or parents are happy to help with that, then we can do the session through telehealth instead of being in person as a one-off or for as long as needed, like COVID pandemic.

Mahek Bansal

And I think the benefit there Larissa is that telehealth offers consistency, right? That when situations, circumstances are arising, whether it's illness, whether it's traveling, whether whatever it is, that telehealth offers a way to support therapy intervention to be consistent, which we all know is what supports the achievement of some of the goals and outcomes. So we always talk to parents that life happens and life has its own constrictions and we want therapy and intervention to try and fit into the routine of life as much as possible because that's how it's going to be effective. And telehealth is a way or a tool to support that consistency. another benefit is for us as therapists and as clinicians, I think telehealth, I mean, I guess I don't know about others, but when I went through uni and I was trained or studying, there wasn't a whole lecture or subject about telehealth. It was something that we sort of just had to learn. And I think the benefit there is that it offers us as clinicians the opportunity to challenge our clinical reasoning and challenge our clinical skills that we might just need to be on the spot flexible to change to a telehealth session. How are we going to adapt our activities, how are we going to adapt our goals, how are we going to adapt our resources? All of these things are challenging us as clinicians, which is awesome for our own clinical development.

Larissa Ferrari

My next benefit, similar to yours but slightly different, I thought about actually us as therapists when we can't be present. So when we are in a practice, like we are, like an in person private practice, then it's tricky for us to be somewhere else. Let's say if I had to travel, if I have someone sick in my family and I had to travel, maybe having that telehealth option would help me to provide that consistency of service to my clients, but without being present. And I think for the other therapists, like more community based therapists, as you've mentioned before, it allows them to spend less time traveling and commuting between clients and just to increase their caseload or maybe just to have a little bit more of a balanced work life with their personal life. So I think from our point of view as therapists, there's also some benefits as well to consider.

Mahek Bansal

100%. So I think telehealth has a lot of benefits and I think that's also why with things that have happened in the past, for example, COVID, we've only seen telehealth become more and more adopted across the world, really. Where people were forced to stay at home and not have this face to face access to services. And through that

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we've all, I think, become more confident or maybe had more opportunity to use telehealth and see its benefits. But with everything, there are always challenges that needed to be navigated and without knowing what those challenges are, we can't problem solve how to navigate them. So, Larissa, tell us your first barrier.

Larissa Ferrari

Okay, so I think as a paediatric or professional therapist, the first barrier I can think of is that most of my clients will need someone to be there to support them; either to set up the tools, the equipment needed, but sometimes they will need that person to redirect their attention or to help them to perform activities. It's not with all my clients, but there is a good part of my clients that would only be able to participate with that extra support around. And that could be a barrier if you think of a full caseload, if someone can't be there, or if they have to consider being with their child while working at home and things like that. So that could be one of the barriers for me.

Mahek Bansal

Yeah, and I think my barrier builds off of that. Not only is it that you might need to consider someone else being there to facilitate the session, it's also, I think, working in paediatrics, engagement is such a big part of what we do and telehealth can present some barriers for engagement in the sense that we need to rethink how we engage with a child when we can't be with them in a physical space. A lot of how we facilitate engagement is through our therapeutic use of ourselves. So through our body language, through our gestures, how we're holding space, how we're creating this safe environment, our back and forth interactions, things like this, which can, I guess, look different, will look different on a telehealth platform.

So it presents a challenge for us and I guess more reflection for us of what might we need to put in place, how might we need to change our activities, the way that we're using ourselves to facilitate the same level of engagement through telehealth. Because as we've talked about in previous episodes, without engagement, we can't work on our goals.

Larissa Ferrari

Okay, I'll beat up on that as well because we are on fire. The other thing I was thinking is that it's almost like technology is part of every child's life or most of the children's life nowadays. And it's also us working on engagement using something that they really like to use on their own, which is probably their iPad, computers, technology. And they know how to navigate that, they know how to explore that, they know how to access the things they really really like that can be more engaging than ourselves as therapists. So it's just a barrier to add to that engagement that you're talking about.

Mahek Bansal

100%. My other barrier is that considering that there are a lot of differences to

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consider with telehealth, it changes the way we prepare for it, I think, especially if you're doing telehealth regularly or even if it's just like a one off for consistency. We need to make sure that we've prepared adequately in the sense of sending the resources to the parent prior so that they can print them or letting them know what they need to have accessible at the time of the session. But that means for us we need to have planned all of our activities already, sent them out to the parent ahead of time, liaise with the parent and all of this. So I guess it might have more of our time and resources to do all the initial set up just to ensure the success of the session.

Larissa Ferrari

And as you might know, we improvise a lot in other sessions, so whenever something is not working, we always have that extra bits around to help. And during a telehealth session you might not have a lot to improvise with apart from yourself. But again, I think once you get used to using this resource more often, it's just knowing how to navigate through that service you've got. It could be the software you've got and how you could improvise using that because it's a different thing, right?

Mahek Bansal

100%. And I think that then that comes down to us as well. When we're starting to set up a telehealth session with a client, then maybe we can think of the questions that we could ask the parent beforehand about where do you think you'll be setting up for the child? What is in the room? What do you have available? What toys are around just to have in the back of your mind what is accessible for this child, so that when you're trying to think on the spot, you already have an idea of what they might be able to access at home.

Larissa Ferrari

I think you just gave away a little bit of our next episode

Mahek Bansal

But, I feel like they all link stick to the barriers.

Larissa Ferrari

So I'll come up with another barrier which I think it's the parent coaching side. I love that and I think that's evidence based proved that it's the best way to support our clients is to empower the parents to know what we do, why we do, and to get them to learn how to do as well. But I feel like sometimes, nowadays parents, carers, whoever is supporting that child, we all have such a busy life and sometimes through telehealth, it's just requiring that extra effort from the parent or the person who's supporting that child to do things, to carry on with things. Ideally it should be that in-person as well.

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So I would say it's a barrier nowadays for everyone, even during in person sessions, but just to have that person with us, learning with us, and to be able to provide that throughout the week or the fortnight. So then we could revisit after a week or two or a couple of days and move on with our next strategies and goals. I know that this could be quite tough on parents with the overload or any other main carriers.

Mahek Bansal

100% and I think potentially Larissa, you've brought up a point that maybe we should pencil in for a future episode around parent coaching because I think it is such a big part of our role and there are, I guess, ways to navigate it and make sure that we are being empathetic. We're listening to where the parent and the family is at because of course we want to provide strategies and tips and stuff, but we also need to work with the capacity that they've got without any judgment. So I think let's schedule that for a new episode.

But for, my last barrier, I think that I have to just talk about the bread and butter of telehealth, which is things that are out of our control, like internet and connection and things like that. Where you plan a beautiful telehealth session, you've got all the resources prepped, and you jump online, and halfway through, you can't hear the child, the child can't see you, everyone's frozen on the screen, and there's not much you can do about it. I guess access to devices, internet connection and things like that have generally, I would say, improved through COVID and stuff.

Of course there are still lots of areas, lots of communities that don't have equitable access to these things and that is a big challenge for telehealth. Where while this could be such a great service, especially because their accessibility is less, they also might not have accessibility to the equipment and resources required for telehealth. But I think even if we do have access to it's also something that sometimes can just be out of our control. Bad weather, a storm or the internet just doesn't like us that day. So we just got to be flexible with that.

Larissa Ferrari

That was my last but not least barrier, which is a big one. It's like things we cannot control at all. It's not on us, it's not on the family, it's not on the client, it's on the devices and the equipment that's needed for the telehealth so that was my last one because we are very synced, apparently. Have you got any other barrier?

Mahek Bansal

No, I don't, but I think that it would be great if everyone listening would want to share some of the barriers that they've encountered with telehealth. Because, again, when we can start highlighting some of these barriers is then when we can reflect on them and make sure that we've got solutions and strategies in place for when we do face them. So if anyone has some barriers that they want to share with us, please feel

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free to connect with us and we will share them with the whole community. Thank you so much to everyone listening, and we will be back with you for our next episode, where we'll continue the conversation with a little bit more of the practical tips and strategies of how to run a telehealth session, get it set up, and build it up for success.

Larissa Ferrari

That sounds like a great plan. So we'll see you in two weeks with our next episode.

Mahek Bansal

Okay, thanks everyone. Bye.