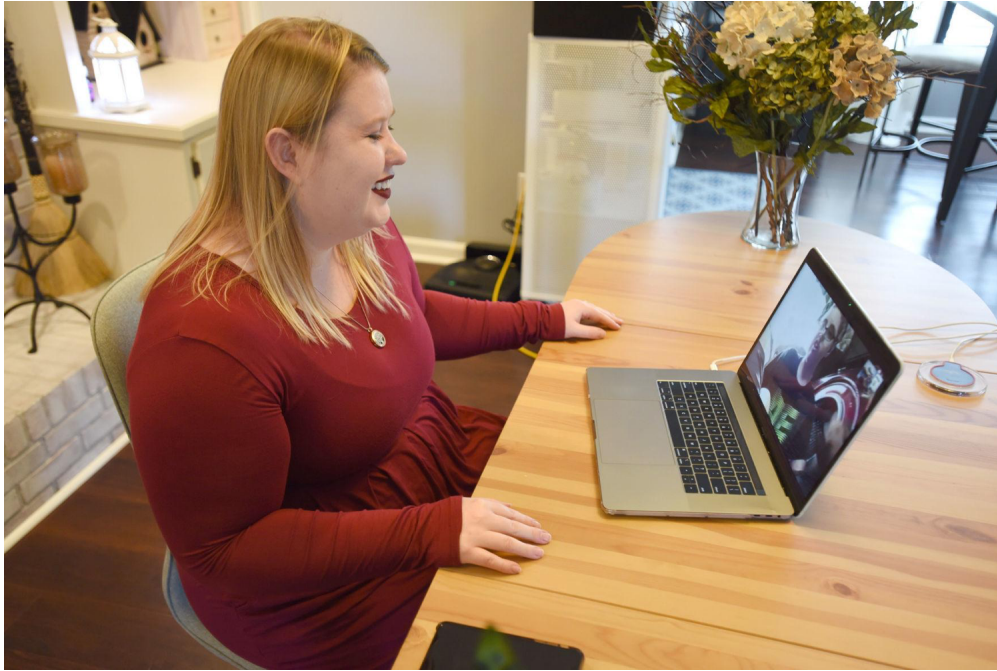


## Therapists switch to virtual visits to keep clients on track

By Renee Beasley Jones Messenger-Inquirer

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Jessica Lynn Hatfield, owner and occupational therapist of TheraTree Pediatric Therapy Services, works with client Nick Grant as he does his laundry at home during a virtual visit.

Photo by Alan Warren, Messenger-Inquirer | [awarren@messenger-inquirer.com](mailto:awarren@messenger-inquirer.com)

When it comes to occupational, physical and speech therapy, virtual visits are now part of the new norm.

In the past, providers were required to use HIPAA-compliant online platforms for virtual visits. Initial patient encounters could not be online, and Medicaid required pre-authorizations.

The state changed those rules after the coronavirus put the kibosh on in-person therapy sessions.

“They’ve really loosened up all the restrictions,” said Sandy Hayden, vice president of outpatient services at Wendell Foster.

As a result, that agency started offering online therapy sessions on April 6. So far, about 125 Wendell Foster clients use virtual therapy.

“Our preference will continue to be face-to-face sessions,” Hayden said. “But, by all accounts, it has gone extremely well.”

In fact, virtual visits have been so successful Wendell Foster officials can see future applications after in-person sessions resume. For example, online services could come in handy during school snow days, when parents are too ill to leave home or when a family lacks transportation.

Carol Grant’s son, Nicholas, 13, receives physical and speech therapy from Wendell Foster and occupational therapy from TheraTree Pediatric Therapy. All his weekly sessions are online now.

“It’s actually been kind of cool,” Grant said.

Face-to-face sessions are preferable; however, she believes virtual visits provide flexibility and convenience that can prove useful going forward. For example, Nicholas suffers from sinus issues and may request online therapy on days he doesn't feel well in the future.

"There's another option now," Grant said. " ... The technology is awesome."

TheraTree Pediatric Therapy owner and therapist Jessica Hatfield said her office started telehealth visits with patients before Gov. Andy Beshear shut down in-person sessions.

Hatfield had talked with colleagues nationwide, some of whom worked in areas affected early on by the coronavirus. She saw the writing on the wall and started working early to go virtual.

She transitioned some patients to online sessions as early as March 16.

About 70% of TheraTree's clients now use telehealth visits, which can be customized for children of all ages.

Hatfield will continue to offer virtual visits after in-person sessions resume. Some of her clients travel two hours one way for services. Telehealth will provide them with options.

"We also would like to have this when we discharge patients," she said.

Online access should make easy work of follow-up visits, which assure therapists their clients continue to thrive after graduation.

Progressive Sports Therapy and KORT, rehabilitation clinics in Owensboro, also offer "telerehab" services.

In addition, Puzzle Pieces uses Zoom for two one-hour classes each day, said Amanda Owen, founder and executive director.

All Puzzle Pieces clients don't participate, but for those who do, it has become a lifeline, Owen said. Staff members host online activities, such as cooking demos, games, scavenger hunts, art contests and more.

Also, Owensboro Dance Theatre recently started teaching Puzzle Pieces clients weekly dance classes.

"Families have reached out, thanking me," Owen said. " ... It gives (clients) hope and something routine and a connection with their friends."

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