



THERAPY GOES VIRTUAL

Clinical psychologists, Dr Vivien Norris and Dr Jessica Cardy, explain how they have adapted the way they work to be able to deliver therapeutic services online

We are part of a multi-disciplinary team at The Family Place – an adoption support agency providing a range of therapeutic services for families. These include assessments and training, consultation, Theraplay, dyadic developmental therapy (DDP), music and art therapy, support across transitions and sensory regulation work.

Until the coronavirus outbreak, all of our work was done face-to-face. So, when social distancing began, we were unsure about how we would be able to continue to provide a service that could be impactful.

None of us was experienced in delivering therapy remotely. Our service and the theories underpinning it are based on genuine human contact, so our confidence in and experience of using online platforms was limited.

We did not know how our therapeutic approaches could be adapted for use remotely, especially when we work with many dysregulated children who might need physical interventions – such as close contact and touch.

Another issue was how to manage the more complex extended sessions we run with families (called intensives), as we normally carry these out as a team.

We had to decide quickly whether to pause our interventions or to try online working. The unanimous view of our team was that we should try it and give the choice to families as to whether they paused or continued.

We have not assumed that continuing is necessarily the best option. Our priority is, and always has been, how we can be helpful to families, and so we have been guided by each that we are working with.

For the families who have chosen to continue (which is the majority), there have been a range of implications. Trying to learn and adjust to a remote way of connecting with their therapist or practitioner is an added layer of stress that can take away from the level of support experienced.

We've already seen that our online efforts seem to work much more effectively with some families than others, but the vast majority are appreciative of some level of support.

How does remote therapy work?

Theraplay®

In online Theraplay (new to us all), the practitioner has to rely much more on the parent/carer than usual since it's impossible to physically intervene.

We have facilitated typical Theraplay sessions (in terms of structure) but have adjusted the activities to those that are more manageable remotely and have guided parents more directly.

We have sent families 'Theraplay kits' with the materials they need and are developing a video library of activities to help prepare parents. In many cases parents have found it more manageable to lead sessions than we had expected, and this has made us wonder whether we could empower parents earlier on in the work than we might have previously.

There have been some delightful sessions and moments of surprising online magic. It's worth noting that all sessions have been with families with whom we have an established relationship and we anticipate this may be harder with new relationships.

Dyadic developmental psychotherapy

DDP sessions have continued with some older children and their parents. Interestingly, some young people seem to find it easier to be more open in online sessions than they do when face-to-face.

Perhaps the intersubjective intensity is less online and therefore more manageable. It could also reflect that young people may be more comfortable generally communicating via a screen.

This has created some challenges around ensuring that the young person does not become too vulnerable or move too fast when the practitioner is not in the room to provide support.

With younger children the use of puppets is proving helpful.

*A registered service mark of The Theraplay® Institute, Evanston, IL, USA.



Assessments

To date, we've carried out two family assessments remotely. We provided the families with kits that would guide them through the assessment and then either watched them complete it live via Zoom or asked them to record themselves doing it and send us the footage via an encrypted memory stick we had provided.

We have also used parent telephone/ Zoom discussions alongside our usual questionnaires to pull together the assessment.

This is far from ideal, but families want to proceed and are eager for support, as things are often more difficult now than they were at the time of referral.

Overall, we feel we are gaining sufficient levels of detail to be helpful, and we are explicit in our reports that the assessment did not include face-to-face contact.

Music, art therapy and sensory regulation work

Our team members have been very creative in finding ways to continue to offer this work, using everyday household materials and directing parents towards certain activities, as well as facilitating online sessions.



"[Coming to The Family Place] is more or less the one bit of 'normal' life that we have found the toughest to go without. So, although most days I think we are fine and managing, it clearly meets a real need for us. It's possibly the only space where we feel safe and cherished as a family and can have fun in a way that is not too challenging for our child."

One limiting factor may be the extra work for parents in getting organised, as well as their level of comfort with mess.

We have successfully made strong arguments for sensory equipment to be funded for a couple of families in order to help their children regulate. These families have fed back that the impact has been huge, especially for those who do not have access to outdoor spaces.

Family intensives

Our family intensives have been challenging since we usually use several therapy rooms and organise the day around different sessions (child and parent, sibling/s, parent only, and whole family). This is much harder to organise remotely and we are currently trying out different scenarios.

The families involved remain keen to continue, as are we, but we feel that their experience is compromised. We will continue to evolve our practice and try to find ways to ensure they can be properly engaged with and nurtured, but this is certainly one of the trickiest sessions to deliver remotely.

Find out more about The Family Place by visiting thefamilyplace.co.uk.

Adoption UK's tips for making the most of online therapy

Try and keep elements of the routine you normally have around sessions

The transition process in and out of a session is very important and so your normal travel routine to therapy is an integral part of your experience.

For some families, the journey might provide quality time together to chat or to stop for lunch or a snack. This experience is difficult to achieve remotely, but you could try eating a packed lunch in the car or having a picnic in the garden before your virtual session to keep the ritual going.

Set up a therapy space for your session

It's really important to find a space where you feel comfortable and secure so you can make the most out of your session. For many people, a bedroom can feel too personal – but other areas may be too noisy or full of tempting distractions.

Find a space that you can close off from the rest of the house, remove any items that aren't needed and make sure you have what you need for the session close to hand, so you won't have to keep leaving to fetch things and break the continuity of the session.

Ask for privacy

If you're living in a house with others who are not part of the therapy session, speak to them beforehand and stress how important it is that they do not disturb you during your therapy time. If possible, arrange for them to be out of the house while your session takes place – maybe they can go for a walk or spend some time in the garden.

Speak to your therapist about what isn't working for you

If there are aspects of remote therapy that aren't working for you, discuss them with your therapist. It may be that they can adapt the way they work so it suits you better. Remember – this is all new for them too, and they will be glad to get your honest feedback so they can work out how to help you.

Know when you need to take a pause

It may be the case that online therapy just isn't working for you and your family. If this is the case, don't be afraid to take a pause for a while. You can always try again at another point. If you decide that you will need to wait until face-to-face sessions can resume, see page 36 for a therapist's advice on what you can do to help children through a break in their therapy.