

APPSAC ALERT



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Special Points of Interest:

Some of the greatest challenges to a forensic practice that involves utilization of remote and virtual technology are the following:

- *To ensure confidentiality for those we are evaluating/treating.*
- *To protect and to ensure, to the extent possible, the integrity and accuracy of the assessment tool utilized.*
- *To make sure to communicate your findings in ways that reflect this new condition, and to discuss the extent to which the reliability and validity of findings from assessment performed in this manner may be compromised.*
- *To make sure to remain informed of newly developed assessment instruments and therapy strategies developed in keeping with the APA guidelines and related professional sources, specifically related to telepsychology.*
- *To seek training, consultation, and supervision in the delivery of telepsychological services when necessary to ensure optimal adherence to standards of practice of forensic psychology.*

Telepsychology Services in Child Maltreatment Cases

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Events emerging from COVID-19 have led to a shift in practice, highlighting the absence of teleguidelines across the various child maltreatment disciplines. There are new guidelines for teleforensic interviews (National Children's Alliance [NCA], 2020) within the child maltreatment field, and empirical support is accumulating for telemedical evaluations of suspected abuse (Walsh et al., 2019). However, we are unaware of national guidelines concerning the remote delivery of psychotherapy or forensic mental health assessments specifically to families involved with Child Protection Services (CPS).

Fortunately, some literature is available in this area that is guiding our approach in this matter. To such an end, this brief article is meant to provide a succinct summary of the most recent American Psychological Association (APA) "Guidelines for the Practice of

Telepsychology" (American Psychological Association, 2013). We address preparation for using telepsychology, starting your telepsychology appointment, protecting privacy, test administration issues, and documenting appropriately.

A Cautious Approach is Advisable

The following information from the APA's telepsychology guidelines is not specific to remotely conducting psychotherapy or forensic mental health assessments in a CPS context. Therefore, readers are encouraged to make contextually informed treatment and evaluative decisions. This information is aspirational and is not intended to supplant professional judgement. Lastly, there may be an impetus to promulgate teleguidelines across the various child maltreatment disciplines due to the impact of COVID-19, but it is advisable to resist this impulse before carefully analyzing several factors, such as sustained need,

current research, professional consensus, legal and regulatory clarity, and the acceptance of the teleservice in the child maltreatment field and the courts (American Professional Society on the Abuse of Children [APSAC], n.d.; APA, 2015).

Readiness for Using Telepsychology

Prior to starting telepsychology services, psychologists strive to remain aware of licensure and other requirements concerning the interjurisdictional provision of telepsychology. Psychologists also strive to ensure their competence with telepsychology technology and its appropriateness for examinees and clients over the course of the service.

Starting Your Telepsychology Appointment

At the start of the service, psychologists make reasonable efforts to identify emergency contacts and resources in the examinee's or client's area. Their environment (e.g., distractions) could affect the safety, privacy, and effectiveness of telepsychology. Therefore, psychologists instruct examinees and clients on how to tailor their surroundings to maximize the effectiveness of assessments and treatment and to insure compliance with standards of forensic practice. Most importantly, throughout the service, psychologists continue to assess and ensure the appropriateness of using telepsychology. They also endeavor to follow the recommendations in the empirical literature and professional standards concerning telepsychology.

Protecting Privacy

Regarding privacy, psychologists attempt to develop and share policies and procedures on how interactions will work through the technology, and how the security of data and information will be handled. To this end, psychologists may obtain consultation from technology experts concerning security measures. Psychologists also strive to be cognizant of tracking cookies, adware, and so on, which should be regularly deleted. Lastly, psychologists analyze vulnerabilities to unauthorized disclosures of data and information; and should a breach occur, the appropriate parties are informed as soon as possible.

Test Administration Issues

If administering testing, psychologists contemplate the issues surrounding remote assessments with instruments developed for in-person use, such as reasonable accommodations, test security issues, and the limitations to the administration or interpretation process. In these circumstances, maintaining the integrity of the assessment's reliability, validity, administration conditions, and so forth deserves careful attention. To this end, a trained proctor at the remote testing location may be considered.

Psychologists strive to use telepsychology norms (if available). They also try to recognize, explain, address, and account for limitations to remote assessments, as well as differences between in-person versus telepsychology assessment. Lastly, if gathering online information about examinees or clients, psychologists consider the ethical, legal, and practical implications, including apprising examinees of how such information will be used and stored.

Documenting Appropriately

In keeping with the APA "Guidelines for the Practice of Telepsychology" (APA, 2013), psychologists are encouraged to document the following when using telepsychology:

- If telepsychology was used for assessment purposes, including a description of assessment accommodations or testing adaptations.
- The reasoning for the telecommunication method(s) selected (e.g., the examinee's or client's familiarity with technology).
- The informed consent, which includes how threats to confidentiality are greater when using telecommunication instead of in-person communication.
- Emergency plans for ensuring the effective and safe usage of telepsychology when problems emerge.
- Instructions given to clients or examinees concerning what they should do in emergency situations (e.g., if experiencing suicidal ideation).
- Information provided to clients or examinees concerning the risks and benefits of

- telepsychology.
- Security measures to prevent unauthorized access to data and information (e.g., processes for disposing of data, information, and technology; and the technology used to destroy any data or hardware).

Final Comments

In conclusion, the APA “Guidelines for the Practice of Telepsychology” (APA, 2013) provide aspirational guidance that is much needed due to the impact of COVID-19 upon CPS and its system partners. However, these guidelines are not specific to remotely serving children, or to conducting psychotherapy or forensic mental health assessments in a CPS context. Therefore, in your practice, consider exploring if CPS in your state has created standards or guidelines concerning your telepsychology work in response to COVID-19 (e.g., New Jersey Department of Children and Families, 2020). Also, it may be helpful to consider literature regarding forensic telepsychiatry (Gunter, 2010; and Miller et al., 2005) and forensic mental health assessments in the digital age (Batastini & Vitacco, 2020), as well as the “American Telemedicine Association Practice Guidelines for Telemental Health With Children and Adolescents” (Myers et al., 2017) and American Psychiatric Association’s *Telepsychiatry Toolkit: Child and Adolescent Telepsychiatry* (n.d.). Also, in your practice, it is important to consider jurisdictional issues, your competence with telepsychology, and if telepsychology is appropriate for your client or examinee on an ongoing basis. It may also be helpful to create policies and procedures governing the start of your telepsychology appointment, protecting privacy, test administration issues, and documentation. We hope this brief article will encourage you to continue your important work during these unprecedented times by making telepsychology more approachable.

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News from APSAC

How can we help support you through COVID-19?

Since COVID-19, APSAC has pivoted to meet the needs that have been expressed by some members. As we plan to do even more, we need to hear from you! Please take a moment to [complete this survey](#) - you'll be entered into a drawing for a free annual membership!

[Take the Survey](#)

The 2020 APSAC Colloquium in Rescheduled to September 21-24 in New Orleans

The 2020 APSAC Colloquium is now scheduled for September 21-24, 2020 - at the Sheraton New Orleans in New Orleans, LA. [Read APSAC's full statement on the 2020 Colloquium](#). This year's theme is:

Strengthening Practice through Knowledge: Promoting Excellence in Prevention, Investigation and Intervention in Child Maltreatment

[View the schedule of institutes, workshops, research sessions and round tables featuring over 125 confirmed presentations](#)

[Register now](#)

All environmental health and logistic policies and procedures will be based on recommendations from the CDC with the health and safety of presenters and participants as APSAC's highest priority. This will include, but not be limited to line-free registration, appropriate space between seats and the availability of face coverings and hand sanitizer.

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