

## **Instituting Privacy Measures During Virtual Child and Adolescent Therapy**

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Creative methods continue to be implemented for working from home, online learning, and attending virtual appointments. Some families rearranged living spaces to create offices or workspaces, while other families created comfy corners or nooks, transformed their beds during the day, or used common areas in the home. Each family implements personalized methods to adapt, with some encountering more obstacles than others. While each family member's responsibility in this collective home workspace requires some level of peace and quiet, virtual therapy appointments require an enhanced level of space and privacy. An immeasurable number of unique circumstances complicate replicating the privacy that has been so carefully implemented in the therapy office at home.

The following are recommendations to aid in fostering a confidential virtual therapy space for children and adolescents:

- 1. Meet with Caregivers First** – Prior to the initial virtual session with the child or teen, first meet with the caregivers to engage them, and to discuss ways to optimize the child's virtual therapy. As part of this initial session, help the caregivers understand the child's need for a quiet, private space for virtual therapy and offer specific suggestions, such as some of the ideas outlined below. It can also be helpful to send to the caregiver a document or letter that puts the ideas in writing.
- 2. Tour the Client's Living Space** – Therapists are generally familiar with the intricacies of their in-person office space. They likely have a clear understanding of the surrounding rooms, the proximity of the waiting room, the sound proofing between rooms, and the other extraneous noises that they hear. Being in a client's personal space does not afford the same understanding and comfort within this refined therapeutic space. Ask clients if they and their family are comfortable with giving a tour of the room where they are receiving services and some of the surrounding areas. Having a clearer picture of the layout of the home space can assist the therapist in understanding how close others may be, where background noise is coming from, and to simply orient to the space. It is challenging for a therapist to assist in implementing privacy measures when disconnected from the space that they are employing these measures. After seeing the space, additional, personalized suggestions could be provided for strengthening the level of privacy.
- 3. White Noise Machine** – The first method to creating a private home space for virtual therapy is to attempt to replicate in-person soundproofing methods to the best of the family's ability. Many therapy offices have white noise machines. Many children and adolescents have a small portable Bluetooth speaker, home assistant (e.g., Google Home, Amazon Echo), or an equivalent device that can be transformed into a white noise machine during the session. There are free white noise and calming tone smart phone or tablet applications that can be projected to one of the aforementioned devices and positioned outside the door or space of the virtual therapy session to mitigate noise coming from the virtual therapy session.

4. **Headphones** – Wearing headphones during the session minimizes background noise and keeps a portion of the session within the confines of those headphones. For ease of moving around the room, when available, Bluetooth headphones are recommended. When completing a nonverbal task, the direction provided by the therapist will not be heard by others within close proximity to the session. When engaging in verbal dialogue, children have the choice whether or not to respond at any given time if their privacy could be breached and they do not want to reply to something that they do not want others to hear. When they make the choice to not answer, nobody will know that a question was asked, so further questioning and discomfort after sessions about the topic will be avoided.
5. **Messaging** – Most teletherapy platforms offer messaging options. Children and adolescents who are able to read and write can elect to respond to certain portions of therapeutic discussion or fully engage in the session via messaging. Messages within privacy compliant video platforms are protected, which make this a great alternative to verbal interactions. Therapists can ask certain questions and request for the client to type responses. Children and adolescents frequently use messenger to communicate and connect with friends, and sometimes this is a more comfortable and desirable method for engagement. In some instances, it is seemingly easier to disclose when the words can be typed instead of spoken.
6. **Special Toy** – If siblings are interrupting or being overly noisy or disruptive during the client’s virtual session, then the caregiver can provide that child with a quiet toy that can only be played with during their sibling’s therapy time. The client should also get a special toy to play with after the session.
7. **Provide Families with Creative Tasks** – Occupying others within the home with a creative task can assist in improving the privacy within the therapy session. The therapist instructs caregivers and sibling(s) to complete a specified connecting, therapeutic family activity in another area of the home to busy them, while also supporting family connection in the process. It is recommended that the activity is quiet enough to not disrupt or impede the therapy session but engaging enough to divert attention from the client’s therapy appointment. Examples of directives include: “Draw a picture all together of something you’re all looking forward to doing as a family, then at the end of the virtual session, present the drawing to me” or “Look through family photo albums together and talk about favorite memories.”
8. **Encourage Collective, Routine Self-Care Breaks** – Every human being needs self-care to augment mental and emotional wellness. Therapy is weekly self-care hour for the client. This presents an ideal time for the family to also engage in personal or collective self-care practices. Oftentimes, intentional self-care is not prioritized because time is limited and overextended in various areas of our lives. Therapists can encourage families to dedicate the child’s therapy hour to tending to their own minds and bodies as well. Similar to the creative task, this allows the child to have uninterrupted, confidential time and space in session, while family members are also meeting their own self-care needs, when they otherwise would not dedicate this indispensable time to themselves. The

therapist can suggest some self-care activities such as: Give yourself a facial, do yoga, or take a bubble bath.

9. **Get Outdoors** – If the client is old enough to be home alone, then the therapist might suggest that the family members do something outdoors during the client’s virtual session. This offers the dual benefit of facilitating fun, active, activity or doing something involving nature.
10. **Meet Outside the Client’s Home** – If all else fails, meet with the client outside of their home, such as in the car, or at a friend’s home. Obviously, this suggestion is geared toward older clients, and the location should be away from unwanted eavesdroppers.
11. **Address the Caregivers Underlying Needs** – If caregivers are found “listening in” on the child’s virtual session, explore their reasons. Often this eavesdropping stems from the caregiver’s concern for their child. It is therefore important to normalize and validate the caregivers feelings. It is also helpful to discuss ways to balance the child’s right to confidentiality with the caregiver’s need to receive appropriate information from the therapist about their child’s sessions.

Adapting therapy services to children and adolescents’ homes presents many unique challenges that require ongoing problem-solving and creativity to ensure that therapists are providing ethically sound therapeutic care. Confidentiality within the therapeutic environment is of great importance. Despite difficulties that arise, it is a significant honor and privilege to continue supporting and maintaining consistency in our clients’ lives, especially during these present times of heightened anxiety and uncertainty.

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