

Telehealth: A Resource for Families Enrolled in New Brunswick's Preschool Autism Program

The COVID-19 pandemic has turned life as we knew it upside down. Nothing is as it was, and we are adjusting to a “new normal.” You may be asking yourself, what does a “new normal” look like for the Preschool Autism Program?

Autism Intervention Services (AIS) has started using a different service delivery model. Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) and their families continue to receive support but in a way that protects both families and agency personnel. This new service delivery model is called Telehealth.



The Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (EECD) supports the agency's shift to Telehealth which will keep individuals safe while continuing to meet your child and family's needs. Together, EECD and the agencies are working on facilitating and strengthening the offer of telehealth services to your family as an alternative to the in-person intervention you received prior to the state of emergency.

What is Telehealth?

Telehealth is the use of different communication technologies, such as telephones, computers, and mobile devices, to access health services remotely. Telehealth allows your team to work with you and your family through technology instead of in-person. It is a convenient way for your family to receive support remotely while keeping everyone safe by minimizing in-person interactions.



Research and Telehealth

The supports and services provided by preschool autism agencies in NB are based on scientific evidence. Agencies in NB provide intervention services based on the principles of Applied Behaviour Analysis (ABA), a science that is well supported by many years of research and that is the current best practice for supporting preschool children with ASD.

There is a growing body of evidence that supports the use of telehealth services in various fields, including ABA. Research on parent/caregiver coaching through ABA telehealth services shows that it is an effective way to coach parents and caregivers to use ABA strategies to support their child. Examples include supporting parents with implementing strategies to address challenging behaviours, teaching parents strategies to support their child's new or emerging skills, and helping parents use strategies to help their child structure their time.

This means that some of the great, evidence-based supports that your child's team has been offering you and your child in person, can also be offered via Telehealth and can have great outcomes! Not only can telehealth services have positive outcomes, but in these current times where in-person services are not possible, it is a key service to support your child's continued success.

How are services different through Telehealth?

	Before COVID-19	During COVID-19
Service Delivery	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Intensive ABA based intervention • Face to face intervention and clinical supervision • Focus on teaching and strengthening new skills and decreasing challenging behaviours • Parent engagement: collaboration in assessment, development and delivery of intervention programs • Highly individualized • Ongoing and open communication between the team and the family 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Not intensive: can consist of problem solving, behaviour planning and/or skill teaching. • Focus: support and coaching to promote well-being, family safety and decrease risks. • Parent engagement: parent is the primary participant in telehealth • Highly individualized • Ongoing and open communication between the team and the family
Agency Staff	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Intervention provided by Behaviour Interventionists • Supervision by Lead Therapists, Behaviour Consultants and Clinical Supervisors 	Most intervention occurs between parent and supervisors
Location	In-person at: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Home • Early Learning and Childcare facility • Agency 	Telehealth
Intensity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Up to 20 hours per week of direct intervention • Many goals at a time 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No direct intervention by a Behaviour Interventionist • Fewer goals (usually 1-2) • How often the family and team meet varies depending on individual families' needs

What you might need to receive services through Telehealth

Here are some things you may need to receive telehealth services:

- A phone
- An internet connection
- An electronic device with a video camera and a microphone (e.g., desktop computer, laptop computer, tablet, smartphone, etc.)

You may not need all of the equipment listed above. Telehealth services does not mean services via videoconference only. There are various other ways to offer telehealth services. Please reach out to your team to discuss your options so that you can choose the one that is best for you and your child.

Things to consider when getting started:

- Communication is key. Since your AIS team is not working directly with your child, communication is more important than ever. The information you share will inform the basis of the plans and recommendations for your child. Try to be open with your team about the successes and challenges of your day-to-day life so that they can help you work on relevant goals.
- If you are new to video conferencing, let your team know.
- Your involvement in intervention is likely to be very different than it used to be, and that may be uncomfortable. Keep in mind that the other team members understand the situation, and everyone is adapting to a new way.
- Receiving services through Telehealth is meant to help you and not add stress or pressure. Make sure to talk to your team about the things that are most important to your day-to-day life now.
- If you do not have the equipment you need, speak to your team and they will do their best to help you.
- Try to plan for a time where you can focus on the session. This may mean planning a bit of time for your child to be engaged in an activity or interacting with another member of your household.
- It may be better to have a short meeting where you can fully focus rather than a longer meeting that may be hard for your family.
- Your child's team is committed to supporting your child and family and will work with you to help you adjust to Telehealth.



Some final thoughts

EECD and AIS recognize that these may be difficult times for your family. Your family's wellbeing and safety is top priority. We encourage you to take part in these telehealth services at a level that is comfortable and convenient for you.

As the province moves through the next stages, the services offered will adjust, likely a few times. Over the upcoming weeks and months, EECD and AIS will be committed to helping families stay informed, maintain the well-being of the family, and adjust. Stay tuned for additional resources on receiving Preschool Autism services as the province gradually moves to re-opening services.



References

Council of Autism Service Providers (2020). Practice Parameters for Telehealth-Implementation of Applied Behavior Analysis: Continuity of Care during COVID-19 Pandemic. Wakefield, MA: Author.

Ferguson, J., Craig, E. A., & Dounavi, K. (2019). Telehealth as a model for providing behaviour analytic interventions to individuals with autism spectrum disorder: A systematic review. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*, 49(2), 582-616. doi:<http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/s10803-018-3724-5>