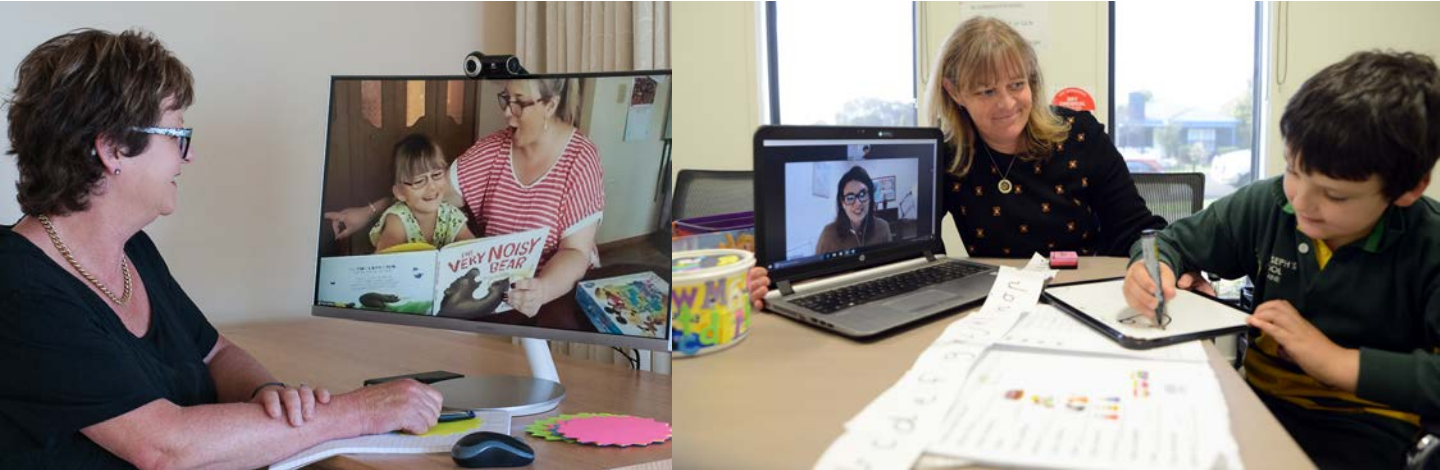




# Telepractice for children with complex disability

## Quality service delivery



**TherapyConnect:** Sue Cameron (left) and Simone Dudley (right, on screen)

**Wobbly Hub Rural Research team:** Dr Monique Hines, Dr Kim Bulkeley, Prof Michelle Lincoln

[sydney.edu.au/health-sciences/research/wobbly-hub](http://sydney.edu.au/health-sciences/research/wobbly-hub)

*"Doing telepractice in my own time in my own environment was absolutely wonderful. I'm not the most technically-minded person, but it was a lot easier than I expected. Telepractice would be a groundbreaking change to services."*

Parent of a child with autism spectrum disorder, Northern Territory, Australia

### What is telepractice?

Telepractice is the delivery of therapy services at a distance by linking clinicians to clients, carers, or others, via technology such as web-based videoconferencing.

### Telepractice in brief

- Telepractice is legitimate choice for disability services—not a last resort
- Quality telepractice supports person-centred approaches consistent with contemporary practice
- Excellence in telepractice is enabled by skilled therapists who develop strong partnerships with carers and others in delivering services

### Increasing rural therapy options

The Wobbly Hub Rural Research Team have established that children with complex disability living in rural and remote Australia often do not receive the therapy services they need because there are fewer therapists and a critical lack of therapy options in those areas. However, telepractice has much potential for spreading therapist' reach.

Funded by auDA Foundation in 2016-17, and in partnership with TherapyConnect, a private allied health practice, we collected information about the telepractice services received by four children with disability and their families living in rural or remote Australia.

We found that quality allied health services can be provided via telepractice to children with complex disability and their families. We also identified essential components of successful telepractice models.

## Benefits of telepractice

### Access to regular therapy and expert support

Carers were enthusiastic about telepractice because they could access therapists with expertise in disability without the costs associated with travelling for services. Regular access to therapy led to strong, collaborative working relationships between therapists, children, parents, carers, and teachers.

### Children achieved functional outcomes

Children achieved positive outcomes for specific, functional goals in areas such as communication, fine motor, emotional regulation, self-care, and attention. Carers noticed improvements in their child's skills. They said this had a positive impact on their child's participation in home and school activities.

### Carer support and skill development

Carers and teachers felt more confident in their ability to support children with complex needs because of the coaching approach adopted in telepractice. We heard from parents that working with therapists via telepractice helped them to feel supported in their role as parents and advocates, and this put them at ease.

### Therapy in everyday environments

Telepractice enabled therapy to occur in environments that are familiar to children. This was particularly important to carers of children with autism, who said that their child's home and school environments were easier to adapt in line with their child's preferences and sensitivities. Although it required extra effort to negotiate telepractice sessions at school, carers said this supported better communication with teachers, with therapy goals integrated into everyday interactions at school.



### For more information

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## Hallmarks of quality telepractice

### Founded on person-centred practice

Telepractice is individualised, in terms of where and when sessions are held, who is involved, what technology is used, and whether direct, indirect, or consultative approaches are taken. Decisions about telepractice components are guided by consideration of the child and family goals, their needs, preferences, and available resources.

### Skilled therapists use technology as a vehicle

Strong clinical skills are the foundation of quality telepractice. Technology is simply the vehicle used to deliver services. Therapists need strong communication, flexibility, and organisation skills. Barriers created by inevitable glitches with technology are often overcome by therapists using advanced problem solving skills.

### Underpinned by strong partnerships

Strong working relationships with carers, teachers, and therapy assistants help to overcome the challenge of working at a distance. These people help to negotiate access to required technology and support therapy strategies to be implemented into everyday routines. Therapists may need to invest time to establish roles, responsibilities, and clear lines of communication across the team.

### Utilises multiple technology modes

Therapists may use assorted technologies to deliver telepractice services, including videoconferencing, telephone, email, apps, and asynchronous video and audio clips. Multimodal technology helps intervention to be tailored to the child; circumvents challenges such as insufficient internet connectivity; and provides options to overcome the challenges of remoteness.

