

Grand ROUNDS

Virtual speech-language proves effective



Denise Dominy, RVH Sleep Language Pathologist, uses new strategies and online resources to engage her young speech-language patients virtually during COVID-19.

Just one month after the pandemic was declared in March 2020, RVH’s Speech-Language program went virtual, and the online service is getting great reviews.

Julianne Favron, whose two-year-old son Mackie started virtual speech therapy during COVID-19, has only positive things to say.

“We really like it. It’s nice to be able to do it from home in his natural environment with access to his toys and the normal things he would play with... and it saves time going to and from in-person appointments. We connect at our allotted time and then move on with our day.”

As for Mackie, mom says he recognizes and interacts well with Denise Dominy, Speech Language Pathologist, on the screen. “It feels just like face to face.”

Most parents are willing to give it a try. “Parents are more actively involved in interventions because they are often the ones giving the models and corrective feedback,” says Dominy.

Those who decline due to poor internet signal are offered support through phone calls and emails.

Virtual training programs are also offered to parents. “Travelling an hour to and from a program is not practical for most families, especially when they have to arrange for childcare (children do not attend the sessions). With the ability to participate from home, we now have families from Deep River, Arnprior, and even a family from Ottawa.”

Dominy says without COVID, if regular schedules had been maintained, virtual services would always have been something to try later ‘when there was time.’

“COVID-19 forced our hand. Now we have a good system that can be used after the pandemic when the situation warrants, for example, families who live far from the clinic, or whose child is medically fragile.”

“Lots of effort has gone into building a library of virtual resources for intervention—games, books, and activities,” says Dominy. She also uses real toys in front of the camera and says she has been pleasantly surprised how interactive the children can be when they don’t even get to touch the toy themselves.

With a year under her belt, Dominy admits that virtual SLP is more challenging than in-person sessions, but “I am seeing results and that makes it all worthwhile.”

Referrals are accepted from parents, healthcare providers, and daycare centres/schools (with parent consent). Parents can easily make a referral online by completing a Communication Checkup (CCU) on the First Words website (www.firstwords.ca). Other service professionals can also use the CCU with parent consent. Referrals are still accepted over the phone at 1-866-994-8124, ext. 5905.