

November 2020

As November begins, it is hard to believe that we have been experiencing the impact of the ongoing pandemic for almost 8 months here in Ontario. We hope that you and your loved ones have kept safe and healthy during these challenging times; our sympathies go out to everyone who has experienced illness or loss.

Back in March, COVID-19 changed the way that we provide clinical services practically overnight. With our in-person services suspended, SSI immediately shifted exclusively to telepractice in order to continue to meet our clients' needs. Our clinicians worked tirelessly to ensure that our online therapy programs would continue to deliver the same high-quality intervention and meaningful results that SSI's clients had come to expect from in-person services.

Since the beginning of April, our SLPs have provided over 2200 virtual appointments, encompassing assessment and treatment for clients in each of our various speech and stuttering therapy programs. Both clients and clinicians have been happy to report how well our therapy programs have adapted to the now common world of videoconferencing!

Telepractice-based services have not only helped to keep our clients and clinicians safe and healthy, but have shown numerous additional benefits, such as:

- the convenience of participating in therapy without adding travel time to and from each appointment;
- the benefits of learning and practicing new speech skills within the home or office environment;
- the naturalness of therapists and clients seeing one another up close, without masks or face shields;
- the ability to complete engaging, interactive therapy activities without concerns about physical distancing or touching shared materials; and
- the capacity to offer services to clients from all across Ontario rather than just those within driving distance of our clinic.

At the end of June, the Ministry of Health gave regulated health professionals, including SLPs, the green light to resume in-person services for clients with clinical needs that could not be met virtually, albeit with abundant safety precautions in place (from screening for COVID-19 symptoms, to instituting enhanced cleaning protocols, to wearing appropriate PPE). At that time, when COVID-19 case numbers were low, we prepared to reintroduce limited on-site services based on individual client needs, while continuing the vast majority of clinical contact online. Now, with the sharp increase in COVID-19 case numbers in Ontario (and particularly in Toronto), we have come to the decision that focusing on virtual service delivery is the best way forward for SSI and for our clients.

Until further notice, all of SSI's stuttering treatment programs will be offered via telepractice only. Likewise, our speech treatment program will continue primarily via telepractice; however, where a young child's needs may best be met by an in-person speech assessment followed by virtual therapy, this may be arranged (with the understanding that wait times for in-person speech assessments may be significantly longer due to limited availability of on-site clinicians).

While we are unable to accommodate some clients' preference for in-person treatment services at this time, we hope that all clients will come to share the confidence we have developed in virtual speech and stuttering services, as well as appreciate the high priority we place on the health and safety of our clients and staff.

We will update our stakeholders on any changes to these policies as we monitor and respond to the ever-changing landscape created by COVID-19 over the next several months. Please be assured that we too look forward to getting back to a pre-COVID state of “normal” one day too!

In the meantime, we are accepting new referrals to all of our virtual speech and stuttering treatment programs. Please call 416-491-7771 or email info@speechandstuttering.com to get started.

If you have any questions about our services, you will be put in touch with a clinical coordinator who can provide further information in a timely manner. Please note that we are happy to offer a free, 15-minute online trial session so that clients/families who are curious about speech therapy via videoconferencing can see what it's all about.

With our best wishes to all,

Elissa Flagg
Interim Clinical Director
The Speech & Stuttering Institute