

HOT Questions **COOL Answers**

Your quick guide to the most frequently asked questions about online therapy



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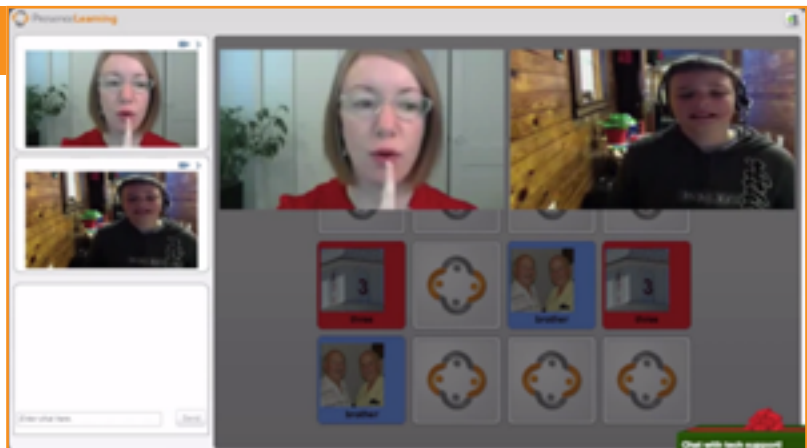
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Executive Summary

Though PresenceLearning currently provides online speech therapy, occupational therapy and counseling to thousands of students in 40 states (and internationally), online therapy is often a new concept to special education directors, coordinators, educators, school administrators and parents alike. As we hold webinars, speak at conferences, visit schools and talk to those involved with special education on a daily basis, we've found that many people have the same questions -- so many, in fact, that we hosted an hour-long webinar titled "HOT Questions, COOL Answers" dedicated to these common queries. This white paper is based on that webinar, and includes both updated information and new examples from districts with which we work.

Perhaps the most frequently asked question is "What does online therapy look like?" If online therapy is something you find hard to imagine, we recommend taking a look at this brief video before reading further. This video shows a portion of an actual session with a student who receives online speech therapy from PresenceLearning:

Watch: plearn.co/slp-memory-activity →→



In this video, a speech-language pathologist (SLP) uses a memory game within the therapy platform to work on /th/ at the beginning, middle and end of words with a student. As they “play,” the therapist is also able to monitor the number of times the student says /th/ correctly and to make notes about the session directly in the platform. This real-time progress data gives special education directors instant information whenever they need it, for example for a report or to provide information to a parent.

You might be surprised by the flexibility and advantages that online therapy can provide to your district. If you, too, have questions about online therapy, or if you work with parents or staff who do, this paper gives you the answers you need to understand and discuss this new method of delivery.

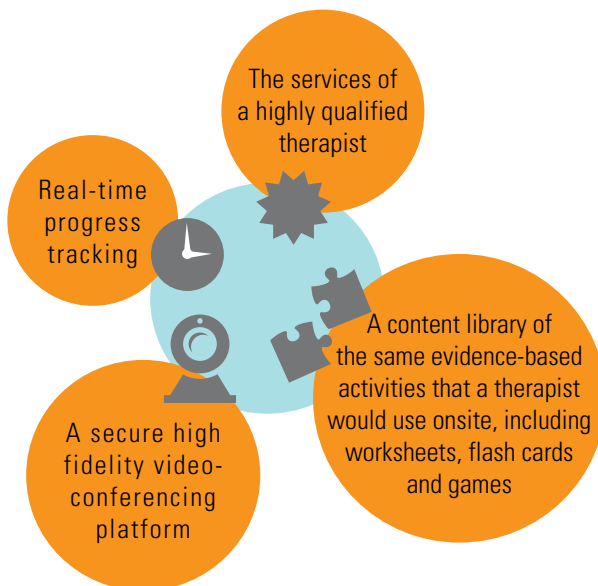
—*PresenceLearning*

After working with PresenceLearning, Fowler USD was able to dismiss almost 50 percent of its speech-language caseload.

Is Online Therapy Effective?

Online therapy is the delivery of speech therapy, occupational therapy and counseling services over the web. Highly skilled, fully licensed and credentialed therapists and school counselors use the same methods and evidence-based practices as they would on site; the only difference is that they are working “face-to-face” with students via a therapy platform that includes videoconferencing. The most effective online therapy combines the therapist’s or counselor’s services with a content library containing all the materials they need (including worksheets, flash cards, card games, story cards, board games, videos, manipulatives and curriculum-based activities), real-time progress tracking and a secure, high-fidelity video-conferencing platform.

The most effective online therapy combines:



Dozens and dozens of peer-reviewed studies spanning decades of research show the effectiveness of online speech therapy, occupational therapy and counseling. In addition, the following organizations support online therapy:

- Mayo Clinic
- American Speech-Language-Hearing Association (ASHA)
- American Occupational Therapy Association (AOTA)
- American Psychological Association (APA)
- National Association of School Social Workers (NASW)
- American Counseling Association (ACA)
- US Department of Health and Human Services Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA)

This section dives into the effectiveness of online therapy in more detail.

Does Online Therapy Deliver Positive Outcomes?

Today’s kids and teenagers have grown up with technology in the home, classroom and elsewhere. Not only is their comfort level high, students are also very engaged in the online environment.

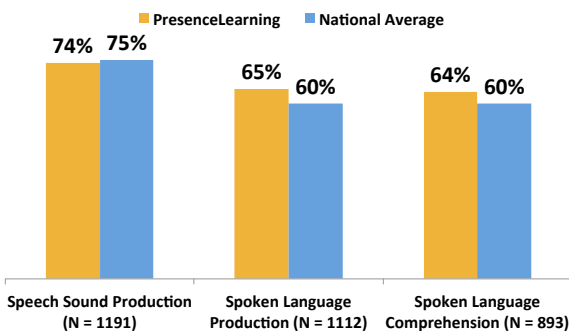
With online therapy, SLPs, occupational therapists (OTs) and school counselors are able to create highly individualized sessions that:

- Draw upon activities that are age and developmentally appropriate
- Use interactive materials and rewards that are of interest to the student
- Incorporate the student’s curriculum
- Are specific to the student’s disorder and/or goal being worked on

Engagement and individualization both contribute to progress, but other aspects are also at play. Students who feel self-conscious about being pulled out of class to go to speech are often more comfortable online, and may even be able to work at a computer station in the classroom. Students on the autism spectrum also often show greater reception to working online.

PresenceLearning has been measuring student progress using the Functional Communication Measures (FCMs) scales developed by ASHA for several years. These scales describe the different aspects of a student’s functional communication and swallowing abilities over the course of speech-language pathology intervention and are part of ASHA’s National Outcome Measurement System (NOMS) data collection and reporting tool.

The functional communication areas that students receiving speech therapy most commonly work on include spoken language production, spoken language comprehension and speech sound production. The PresenceLearning data across all schools served online show that students met or beat the national averages set by students who received traditional therapy from an on-the-ground provider:



- 65% of telepractice students improved their spoken language production by one level or more compared to 60% of the students in the nationally-normed NOMS data set
- 64% of telepractice students improved their spoken language comprehension by one level or more during the school year compared to 60% of the students in NOMS data
- In addition, 74% of students improved their speech sound production by one level or more during the school year, compared to 75% of the students in NOMS data

Research also shows that online occupational therapy produces comparable outcomes related to treatment planning, intervention and client satisfaction. Research pertaining to the online delivery of counseling services to school-aged students is still early, but suggests

that online counseling may actually be even better with kids than it is with adults because this age group routinely uses technology for social connection. It has been shown to be as effective as onsite therapy for a number of problems including depression, mood disorder, oppositional defiant disorder, emotional distress, family distress and skills like health skills, family skills and social skills. Other studies have shown that online counseling deals with symptoms of emotional stress and depression more quickly than onsite therapy. Some have postulated that the layer of distance the between the child and the counselor provided by the online platform may be less threatening to children in emotional distress.

For more research, visit the following:

- Online speech therapy: plearn.co/research-speech
- Online occupational therapy: plearn.co/research-ot
- Online counseling: plearn.co/research-counseling

What About Online Evaluations?

Assessments are a critical problem in many districts for both beginning services for a student or for exiting a student that achieves his or her goals. This can have a ripple effect, impeding on time that could or should be spent providing therapy services. Both ASHA and AOTA support online assessments, which can help reduce assessment backlogs. For example, at Fowler Unified School District (USD) in Fowler, CA, a year-long SLP vacancy resulted in an overabundance of students who needed to be evaluated. After working with PresenceLearning, Fowler USD was able to dismiss almost 50 percent of its speech language caseload. This allowed the district to quickly begin serving new students who qualified for speech therapy.

PresenceLearning provides initial, annual, triennial and exit assessments online using some of the most common instruments for speech and language evaluation as well as occupational therapy, and has delivered nearly 1300 to date, with several hundred more scheduled as of this writing.

For more information on online assessments, check out our webinar, "Online Assessments: MISSION: Possible!": plearn.co/assessments/webinar

Assessments Provided by PresenceLearning

Speech-Language	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • CELF 5 • EVT • PPVT • GFTA • CASL
Occupational Therapy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Beery VMI • Sensory Profile • Family and teacher interviews • Observation of school and functional skills
Counseling	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • BASC2 • Vineland-II Adaptive Behavior Scales

Is Online Therapy Effective for Only Certain Students or Disorders?

Online therapy works for the majority of students, but not all. It has worked for students who have articulation problems as well as those on the autism spectrum or who have more severe conditions including apraxia, Down syndrome and cerebral palsy.

Online therapy can also be better for certain students, for example:

- A student who needs a specialist that isn't available in your area
- A student who feels stigmatized by being pulled out of his or her class
- Flexibility is needed to work around a student's busy schedule
- A student who needs a less distracting environment to focus
- A student who feels less intimidated in the online environment (common with students on the spectrum)

However, online therapy may not be the right option when:

Speech-Language Therapy

- Student cannot pay attention for 5+ minutes
- Student cannot follow simple one-step directions
- Student cannot recognize any letters in the alphabet
- Student cannot recognize words with a hearing device
- Student cannot interact with computers using screens
- Student does not respond to physical prompts
- Student requires constant hand-over-hand assistance

Occupational Therapy

- Student has difficulty paying attention
- Student has difficulty following directions
- Cognitive, behavioral or motivational factors apply
- Physical or sensory issues apply
- Functional communication is an issue
- Support services are not available

Counseling

- Student is a flight risk
- Student is suicidal
- Student is threat to him/herself or others

Does Online Therapy Work for Groups of Students?

Whether a student needs individual or group therapy is stipulated in the IEP, but the online environment can easily accommodate groups and it works well for them. In fact, over half the students receiving online therapy from PresenceLearning are in group sessions.

Students can be grouped from the same school site or from different school sites across town or even across the state or nation. In one example, two teens about 14 or 15 years old and on the autism

spectrum were receiving therapy from PresenceLearning and were grouped together. At the beginning of the year, the SLPs saw the students individually and noted that while the students were both doing okay, not a lot of progress was made. It was determined to group these two students together and adjustments were made to their IEPs. The students responded very positively and their speech and language skills began to improve rather quickly when they started working together. The students had a lot in common, and each week they eagerly awaited group therapy to engage in positive interactions with their new-found friend. The mother of one of the students commented that she wished her son had been involved in group sessions like this from early on in his life because the work that was done in the group session had made such a drastic difference in his ability to communicate with others outside the therapy and improved his self-esteem at the same time.

Can Online Therapy Be Better than Onsite?

There are many situations where online therapy is better than onsite, and in some cases it's about the only way students can get the help they need. PresenceLearning offers access to scarce experts such as an SLP who has experience and expertise in apraxia or fluency, is bilingual or who can meet culturally diverse needs.

Apart from therapy services themselves, online therapy can also offer the data transparency, increased efficiency and collaboration that facilitates students making progress.



Spotlight on DeSoto County School District:

In Desoto County we are especially excited to be offering the service for our middle school and high school students. Those students often are stigmatized by being pulled out of their class and taken to a therapy room for speech or language services and we faced a lot of challenges getting these students to actually participate in a traditional speech and language session, but by using PresenceLearning online speech therapy, there is no stigma attached to getting the services that students need to make progress with their speech and language goals.

We have a place setup for our students. They come in, they log on to the computer, there is no stigma attached to it. They are working just like any high school students would be. They have their earphones on, they do their therapy session and then they return to classes as they usually would.

There are also a lot of things that interfere with the student's normal day all the time, whether it be a sporting event or club activity or a testing schedule, but PresenceLearning offers us so much flexibility in being able to make up sessions. It was a real challenge to us when we had our traditional model and we had a speech-language therapist serve students at multiple schools, as a student was supposed to get services on Tuesdays and they happened to be absent or a state mandated test required them to participate on that particular day. It was very, very challenging to find time in the student schedule and our speech and language schedule to make up those sessions. PresenceLearning is just phenomenal with the scheduling aspect because it is online and the students can have therapy anytime throughout the school day. We found that our students had a much more consistent level of services online.

—**Debra Giacolone,**
*(former) Exceptional Student Education Director,
DeSoto County School District, Arcadia, Florida*



School budgets are tight and the cost of education is rising. Online therapy can help when looking at the sources of costs and savings.

How Does Online Therapy Work?

The previous section addressed what online therapy is and the benefits it brings to school districts and students. This section covers frequently asked questions about the nuts and bolts of how online therapy is delivered as well as some operational aspects including setup, technical requirements and the staffing needed to make online speech language therapy work.

Does Technology Access Impact the Delivery of Online Therapy?

The basic requirements for online therapy include an internet connection, a computer, a good quality web camera and a headset. The majority of the districts that PresenceLearning works with have sufficient tech infrastructure for online therapy.

Where Is Online Therapy Delivered in Schools?

Space is at a premium in most schools, but the good news is that online therapy can be delivered almost anywhere: resource rooms, classrooms, offices, libraries, computer labs and any other space where distractions are limited so students can focus on the screen. (Due to confidentiality, a student receiving counseling online must be in a private space on his or her own.)

What Are the Cost Considerations for Online Therapy?

School budgets are tight and the cost of education is rising. Online therapy can help when looking at the sources costs and savings.

Costs

- Hourly fee for services delivered
- Hourly fee for indirect service time
- Hiring a paraprofessional (if needed; see *Who Provides Onsite Support to Students Receiving Online Therapy* below)

Savings

- Driving / travel time
- Scheduling
- Lower turnover costs
- Grouping students from different locations
- Legal cost savings (due to issues of non-compliance)
- Efficiency in assessing and exiting students

Who Provides Onsite Support to Students Receiving Online Therapy?

The level of onsite support needed for online therapy depends on somewhat on the age of the student. Younger students definitely need assistance. Older students that are a little bit more independent may not need as much support. Support can be provided by paraprofessionals, classroom aides, an SLP assistant, older student mentors or an E-helper or facilitator. The main support needed is to help with getting the younger children to and from the computer at the appropriate times for their therapy sessions and then having an adult there who can provide help if there are technical issues.

What Materials and Tools Are Used by the Online Therapist?

Online therapists use the same kinds of materials that they would use if they were seeing a student onsite. Flash cards, card games, story cards, board games, videos, worksheets, manipulatives and curriculum-based activities are all the things that therapists can use online.

The PresenceLearning therapy platform contains a library of 45,000 evidence-based activities, sortable by age and goal. This allows therapists to develop highly individualized and engaging sessions for students in line with both goals and the curriculum.

For example, an SLP might pull up a game and add picture cards that have the /R/ sound in them. The student says the words, practices the words in sentences or in single words depending on his or her level and interacts with the platform. The student controls the mouse and can choose the cards and manipulate game pieces. This is very similar to what an SLP does onsite, but it is just on the screen with online therapy. Students can also type in answers or mark on a worksheet, or color it if they are younger students.

Is Online Therapy Secure?

The privacy and security of sessions and student information is paramount. PresenceLearning employs the same level of security as leading financial institutions, and is in line with privacy regulations including HIPAA, FERPA and COPPA. No one can enter the online therapy “room” besides the student and therapist without permission, and the same security used to protect online financial systems is used to protect student information and confidentiality. Therapists and counselors are bound by the same privacy and confidentiality requirements online as they are in an onsite setting.



“This is pretty powerful.”

***—Rex Miller**
Director of Special Education,
Bonnevill Joint School
District 93*

Additional Resources

For more information and to hear from educators themselves about the benefits of online therapy and how it helps districts, visit our product tour page at: presencelearning.com/schools/product-tour/