PolicyWise for Children & Families

PIVOTING TO ONLINE PROGRAMMING DURING COVID-19

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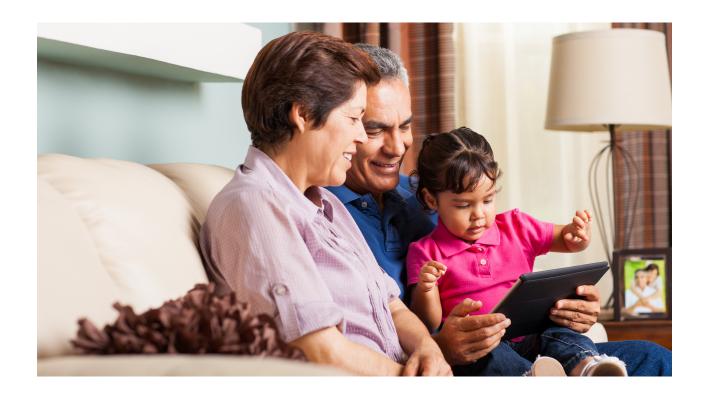Contact info@policywise.com to share your feedback with us.

OVERVIEW

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, social serving agencies have had to transition from in-person to online programming for parents. As a result, there is a need for information on how best to adapt parenting services to online platforms. There is also a need to document and share what has already been done to adapt to online service delivery.

Based on a rapid literature review and interviews with program facilitators and clients from several social serving agencies, PolicyWise for Children & Families (PolicyWise) has documented and developed considerations for delivering programs for parents online. Opportunities for further exploration and development are also provided.

FROM IN-PERSON TO ONLINE

For this report, research and interviews were focused on online parent training and parent support programs. The lessons learned from both research and interviews may be useful to other social services and programs.

Some research can be found on online programming, with several studies highlighting the success of translating established programs to online platforms.[1] An important limitation of the body of evidence is that it was conducted before the COVID-19 pandemic, and often under more ideal conditions.

To capture a much needed perspective of how best to deliver programs online during the COVID-19 pandemic, PolicyWise interviewed staff and clients from agencies in Edmonton and Calgary during fall of 2020. All of the agencies had experience with offering some of their programs online after restrictions from the pandemic prevented delivering services and programs in person.

ADAPTING TO ONLINE PROGRAMMING

First, agencies chose an accessible online platform and ensured clients had access to computers and internet.

Next, agency staff re-examined their program components for online service delivery. Adapting to online programming involved finding a balance between: program mandates, clients' needs, staff capacity, the demand for programs, and registration limits.

The pandemic increased some clients' stress and these clients relied on staff to assist with

> "
> *It's the same content, the same people offering it, it's still a safe place, it just looks a little different.*
> - Agency staff member

their basic needs, and to stay informed about the pandemic. Agencies struck a balance in their programming by providing a combination of group-based and independent activities and increased communication.

ADAPTING TO ONLINE PROGRAMMING

Group-based programs involved holding sessions online using videoconferencing applications.

Agencies offered activity kits and learning materials to clients, which could be completed as a group or individually. Often, activities were included for children so parents could participate in programming.

One-on-one time was an important part of rapport building before the pandemic, so staff had to find ways to capture that virtually. One-on-one connection was achieved through for example, phone calls or direct messaging on apps like Facebook.

Agencies also had to plan and discuss ways to preserve clients' confidentiality online, such as:
- Adapting consent forms
- Choosing platforms that ensured personal information was kept private
- Monitoring the chat groups and social media pages used by the agency

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[The parent] really loved the ability to kind of learn the material and talk about it and implement it together.
- Agency staff discussing a parent's experience having their partner participate in programming

During the pandemic, staff took the time to understand what made programs successful and where there were opportunities for growth.

On the one hand, during the pandemic clients said that they preferred in-person programming for the following reasons:
- They missed being able to connect with staff and other parents
- They appreciated being able to access multiple services at at a time
- They appreciated that childminding was available

ADAPTING TO ONLINE PROGRAMMING

On the other hand, clients had reasons for preferring online programming. Some of these reasons included:

- Safety from COVID-19
- Convenience
- The ability to have other caregivers (e.g., dads) more easily engaged

Technology created more opportunities to connect, although there were challenges around the added time needed to learn the various platforms. Despite the challenges, staff learned to laugh during times of adversity and persist through difficulties together.

Although some programs couldn't go online such as those that provided parent relief, staff tried their best to adapt their services to the emerging needs of clients, such as:

- Changing the time of programs
- Adding links to topics of interest
- Providing activities to keep children engaged in lieu of childminding

Going online has its advantages, such as reducing barriers to accessing services. Once COVID-19 restrictions were eased, many agencies shifted to hybrid programming, where some programs were offered in-person and others were offered online.

Hybrid programming has advantages as it offers:

- Opportunities to scale up
- Multiple modalities for communication
- Provides services to more clients through its enhanced flexibility

The pandemic continues to make the modality of service delivery uncertain, but programs to meet clients' needs must continue. Not only during the pandemic but in the future, online delivery of programs has distinct advantages that agencies may want to consider and incorporate in their service delivery models well into the future.

CONSIDERATIONS

Agencies have demonstrated incredible resilience and adaptability as they have shifted to meet the needs of their clients. The following is a compilation of collective guidance and lessons learned along with additional tips and considerations to support the planning and implementation of online and hybrid programming.

The considerations provide evidence for what has worked well, guidance on how to implement programs, and opportunities for future exploration.

The considerations also make reference to academic, government, and non-profit authored resources. To read these in depth, please see "Sources" at the end of the report. It must also be noted that during research and interviews, it was not in scope to identify the impact of COVID-19 related concerns on programming as it was not in scope.

Considerations are grouped into the following sections:
- **Embrace Technology**
- **Plan Responsively**
- **Engage Meaningfully**

EMBRACE TECHNOLOGY

Not surprisingly, results from the literature and interviews confirmed that delivering online programs well involves more than a video conference meeting and links to resources. Important elements to consider with regard to embracing technology for online program delivery are shared next.

Support efficiency and convenience

Technology offers ways for clients to be more engaged in programming and makes it more convenient to access services.[2,3,4] For example, clients who could more easily access services remotely have the opportunity to engage in programming from the comfort of their home. This allowed for more participation from rural and remote clients and clients with scheduling challenges.

Tips:
- Choose platforms that allow for built-in analytical tools, connections to social media, and engaging ways to deliver materials and activities.[5]
- Agencies found that using Zoom to carry out programming in combination with Facebook to send links and continue conversations with clients was effective.

Create a safe online space

Creating a safe online space is essential for helping clients feel comfortable with participating to establish trust. For example, agencies described acquiring consent verbally and using digital signatures as ways of helping to establish digital safety. As well, staff sometimes established individualized, specific plans for addressing clients' emergent safety concerns or crises, such as feeling unsafe at home.

Tips:
- When relevant, discuss the risks and benefits of specific online platforms explicitly clients.
- Establish words or gestures to signal if a client is feeling unsafe.[6]
- Continue conversations around safety and privacy with clients throughout the duration of programs.

EMBRACE TECHNOLOGY

Expand clients reached

Technology offers ways to reach a more diverse client-base.[7] For example, there were clients who experienced social anxiety during in-person group programs but were more comfortable in online programs. As well, in some cases more family members and caregivers joined in on the activities and programming when clients were accessing services from home.

Tips:
- Connect with IT staff to ensure technology can be readily used for programs.
- Reach clients using multiple modalities such as instant or direct messaging, forums, and group engagement to increase participation.
- Advocate to increase clients' access to computers, internet and data plans that can be used for streaming or meetings.

Keep persisting

Technology doesn't work perfectly and it's what you make of each situation that matters. For example, during the pandemic the combination of internet failures, inconsistent attendance, and increased demand for teaching computer skills, contributed to staff describing moments of feeling defeated. Despite these challenges, staff continued to learn new ways of using online platforms, through training and sharing ideas and small wins with one another.

Tips:
- Remember to be compassionate to oneself and to others.
- Try to re-frame setbacks as opportunities for learning, a chance for action rather than reaction, and as a chance to reach out for support from other staff.
- Document the milestones and achievements that the agency has made, such as the highest number of clients attending online, or kind words from clients, to assess and be reminded that online services deliver value, too.

PLAN RESPONSIVELY

According to interviews, planning online programs in a short amount of time requires being responsive and embracing a "good enough" attitude as staff and clients adjust to a new way of interacting with one another. Elements to consider when planning online programs are captured below.

Use a hybrid approach

A hybrid approach to programming blends both online and in-person services by offering programming in multiple modalities. The agencies had positive experiences with a hybrid approach, as they were able to reach clients who were comfortable in one or both modalities. In the online modality, clients accessed programs through Zoom, Facebook, and were contacting staff individually by phone or text.

Tips:
- Consider ways to organize hybrid programming, such as offering resources only online and offering activities only in-person, or offering the same services online and in-person through live-streaming.
- As check-ins are particularly comforting in both online and in-person settings, make use of ways to frequently connect such as invitations to connect on group forums, instant messaging and postcards.

Re-imagine program delivery

Programs must strike a balance with what is mandated and what clients need. Staff adapted by paring down programs to their core elements and adding on relevant and timely resources (e.g., info sheets, pre-recorded videos) while still addressing the emerging needs of clients.

Tips:
- Break down programs into modules, where essential elements can be delivered in groups and recommended elements can be self-directed.
- Intentionally divide clients into groups to facilitate peer to peer learning.

PLAN RESPONSIVELY

Turn to others and collaborate

There are many agencies in the community that have shifted their programs from in-person to online. Staff at the agencies discussed their programs with other agencies and content experts, even with agencies across provinces.

Tips:

- Leverage existing partnerships to plan services that complement one another. For example, identify online facilitation gurus, use Facebook groups to share facilitator experiences, and borrow ideas and materials for activity kits.
- Host events for similar social serving agencies to brainstorm program ideas and share learning resources with one another.

Document learning and feedback

In the beginning of the pandemic, agencies quickly adapted programming in real time. To maximize learning and make continuous improvements, it is important to reflect and document key decisions that were made and helpful feedback from clients, given that everyone is still learning and adjusting to online programming.

Tips:

- Compile a list of the facilitation techniques (e.g., posing questions using chat box, creating space for socializing) and encourage staff to ask for feedback and continuously share their ideas and lessons learned.
- Use built-in surveys or engagement tools on platforms like Zoom to gather feedback from clients during or after videoconference sessions.

ENGAGE MEANINGFULLY

Both the literature review and interviews revealed the importance of engaging with clients in meaningful and robust ways -- even online. This involves being creative and enhancing connections that already exist. Important elements to considered for meaningful online engagement are described below.

Connect and communicate often

What clients most often look forward to in programs is seeing familiar faces and building on the existing relationships they have. For example clients were active on Messenger, participated in phone calls, and looked forward to socially distanced in-person visits.

Tips:
- At the beginning of programs, establish ways to have open and seamless communication among clients and staff, such as drop-in or sign-up video call hours.
- Reach out to clients who indicate they need connection and clients who don't engage at all.

Make materials fun!

Play makes any activity more fun (adults and children included)! For example, a very popular and helpful addition to the repertoire of what agencies could offer in terms of programming and services was "activity kits" (e.g., baking kits, craft kits, feelings games, child development games). Activity kits also help relieve the pressure for clients to keep children busy when they have to stay home.

Tips:
- Based on the interests and needs of clients, assemble activity kits and deliver them ahead of time to clients. Make sure to include detailed instructions, as clients appreciate the guidance from staff.
- Parents or clients may also appreciate activity kits that can support their wellbeing in other ways such as self-care kits or activities that can be done with others outside of the formal program.

ENGAGE MEANINGFULLY

Empower clients

With online programs, an abundance of group activities can sometimes feel exhausting, with clients potentially spending a lot of time online already. Providing clients with activities to do on their own can give them ways to learn, explore new activities, and also allow them flexibility with their own schedule.

Tips:
- Provide a bank of online resources and activities that clients can complete on their own.
- Create opportunities for self-directed learning. For example, in a group forum, ask clients to provide ideas of topics that they would like to learn about and have clients sign up to become "experts" in one of the topics.
- Continue to learn online platforms together. Staff and clients can try new techniques in meetings together, such as having theme days, where everyone puts up a virtual background according to the theme.

SUMMARY OF CONSIDERATIONS

Choose features and combinations of online platforms that best suit your programming goals to maximize efficiency and convenience.

Discuss and update protocols based on constant feedback to ensure the safety of your clients in online programming.

Attract more diverse groups of clients varying the use of instant messaging, group forums, and video conferencing.

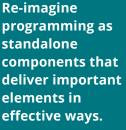**Re-frame setbacks, celebrate achievements, and be reminded of the community that is behind you as you persist through online programming.**

Use the strengths of both online and in-person programming to improve hybrid programming.

Re-imagine programming as standalone components that deliver important elements in effective ways.

Seek out collaborators that can complement your programming needs.

Be responsive and reflective by documenting key program successes and challenges as you go.

Communicate in more than one way both online and in-person to demonstrate the importance of maintaining relationships.

Invest time in creating custom, take-home activities. These activities will go a long way for families and their natural supports.

Empower clients with self-directed resources and activities that expand their knowledge on topics that they want to explore.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR EXPLORATION

Delving into the world of online program delivery is still fairly new for most agencies and clients. Several opportunities for future exploration are presented.

First, during the pandemic, it was clear that some clients were without adequate technological resources (e.g., computer, smart phone, or data plans). Although agencies found ways to provide these resources, in future there needs to be ways that agencies can acquire funding specifically for these needs, or telecom providers need to provide innovative plans to meet the needs of vulnerable populations.

Online programming inherently creates more screen time for families, which can be at odds with research showing the benefits of limiting screen time.[8] It will be important to continue to find ways and understand what makes for high quality and engaging online time.

As well, there is an opportunity to find creative ways to continue to offer programming online and offer screen-free programming.

Another area for further exploration is privacy concerns using online platforms. Agencies were able to borrow from different areas such as counselling to adapt their consent forms, however standardized recommendations and guidance need to be accessible to ensure client safety and privacy as more programs are offered online.

Finally, it is clear that online programming expands the potential to reach more clients. However, agencies, who usually serve the local community, need support on how to collaborate and navigate client bases that may expand to be more geographically diverse with the advent of online programs.

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