



90 Years of Caring for Children—1930–2020

345 Park Blvd
Itasca, IL 60143
Phone: 630/626-6000
Fax: 847/434-8000
www.aap.org

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Dear Dr. Medical Director:

The American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP), a non-profit organization representing more than 67,000 pediatricians, pediatric medical subspecialists, and pediatric surgical specialists dedicated to the health, safety and well-being of all children applauds the work payers have done to maintain access to care, coverage, and payment during the COVID-19 pandemic. We write today regarding the expanded coverage, increased payment, and added flexibilities of telehealth services that have enabled pediatricians to transform how they practice during this public health emergency to ensure children and families can continue to receive needed care. However, with many expanded telehealth policies due to expire within the next few months, **the AAP strongly urges all payers to extend all expanded telehealth policies for 90 days beyond the expiration date of the nationwide Public Health Emergency.**

Telehealth has proven to be exceptionally beneficial during the public health emergency to help overcome challenges associated with the COVID-19 pandemic and need for social distancing. While the AAP continues our work to ensure that children access needed care from their pediatric medical homes, we also know that many families remain concerned about potential risks involved. A recent Kaiser Family Foundation study found that nearly half of all families have postponed or forgone health care services during this pandemic.¹ This is consistent with reports from pediatric practice managers indicating that outpatient visits have decreased between 70 and 90 percent. Fear of COVID-19 is very real for patients and families, and the use of telehealth services helps families feel more comfortable seeking important preventive, chronic, and acute care. The use of telehealth services has enabled social distancing and self-quarantine for both families and clinicians while facilitating continued access to care.

- **Increased Access to Primary Care in the Medical Home:** Telehealth services have allowed patients and families to maintain access to their usual source of primary care during the pandemic. This is particularly important because of the growing incidence of mental health disorders, and the need to ensure timely diagnosis of childhood conditions where early intervention is critical. Telehealth services have been especially helpful for patients and families living in rural areas, as well as those who rely on public transportation.
- **Increased Access to Subspecialty Care, Including for Children and Youth with Special Health Care Needs (CYSHCN).** The use of telehealth by medical subspecialists and surgical specialists has significant benefits for families of CYSHCN. Many CYSHCN are at higher risk of severe outcomes or complications from COVID-19 than their peers. In addition to increased risk, CYSHCN often have complex medical needs that require care from multiple specialists, and care coordination across the entire care team and any supporting services – needs that often force these children and families to have greater exposure to health care settings. Virtual visits help to reduce these burdens on families. Additionally, some specialists have reported that the implementation of telehealth

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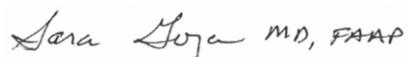
services has resulted in improved patient flow and greater capacity, which has the potential to increase access to pediatric subspecialty services that are in short supply.

- **Pent-Up Demand.** The AAP anticipates that much of the care that has been deferred during the public health emergency will result in greater demand as children and families return to their pediatrician's office. Telehealth will serve as a critical expansion of the pediatric medical home to support this large influx of patients during this time by allowing pediatricians to safely render services and maintain important infection control practices, especially for patients and clinicians at higher risk due to factors such as age and underlying conditions.
- **Identification of Social Determinants of Health.** Many pediatricians have found unanticipated benefits of implementing telehealth by having increased insight into their patients' lives. For example, video visits can offer the pediatrician a glimpse into the patient's and family's homelife, providing additional information about potential needs that can significantly impact health. Similarly, telephone-only visits make virtual care accessible for families without the infrastructure needed for video visits.

For all these reasons, telehealth has been invaluable during this critical time. However, just as states and localities across the nation are carefully phasing out periods of stay-at-home orders and gradually reopening businesses, so too should the health care system be cautious about abruptly ending telehealth policies. Telehealth services can facilitate time-sensitive and medically necessary care to be rendered in ways that protect vulnerable children, families, and clinicians. Continuing the extended telehealth policies now in place will allow pediatric medical homes to best serve families who are hesitant to return to in-person visits, to facilitate infection control and self-quarantine if clinicians are potentially exposed to SARS-CoV-2 virus, and to enable the health care workforce – many of whom are juggling their own challenges related to care of their children and other family members – to continue caring for patients. Though some of the extended telehealth policies may evolve or end over time, they are deeply needed while the public health emergency continues and in the transitional time after the public health emergency ends.

The AAP thanks the payer community for its rapid expansion of telehealth policies in light of the COVID-19 pandemic and strongly urges payers to maintain these expanded telehealth policies through the initial transition following the public health emergency; that is, through 90 days after the expiration of the national Public Health Emergency. The AAP stands committed to working with you to protect the health and lives of children and families by enhancing access to care via telehealth provided by the medical home. Please contact N'Gai Cobb, Senior Director of Healthcare Financing Strategy at ncobb@aap.org at any time to discuss the recommendations and how we may assist you in disseminating information regarding your telehealth expansions.

Sincerely,



Sara H. Goza, MD, FAAP

President

ⁱ Hamel L, Kearney A, Kirzinger A, Lopes L, Muñana C, Brodie M. Impact of Coronavirus on Personal Health, Economic and Food Security, and Medicaid: KFF Health Tracking Poll, May 2020. 2020 May 27. <https://www.kff.org/report-section/kff-health-tracking-poll-may-2020-health-and-economic-impacts/>