

Gen Z won't leave therapists "on read"—text-based therapy is preferred

Article

The news: The HHS doled out \$10.7 million in funding to the Pediatric Mental Health Care Access Program, which will use the cash to provide telehealth-related training and technical

assistance to US providers to diagnose and treat kids and teens with mental health conditions.

Why this matters: The pandemic threw gasoline on the pediatric mental health fire—mental health services and therapy services only became more inaccessible for kids.

Emergency departments around the US are reporting an influx of pediatric mental health patients, but there simply aren't enough providers to deliver sufficient care.

- States like **Arizona** and **Florida** are addressing the pandemic-induced mental health provider shortage by still allowing docs from neighboring states to deliver virtual care.
- However, there's no guarantee these relaxed regulations will outlast the pandemic, so it could be a temporary bandaid to a growing problem.
- Research reveals availability of child psychiatrists pre-pandemic was already scarce, considering **only 17% of patients could nab a new appointment**—and the chances were even lower for children on Medicaid.

Plus, some pediatricians say they lack training on how to treat kids' mental health concerns since they're more used to treating conditions like ear infections, per STAT. To this end, funding for broader pediatric mental health training from the HHS can help pediatricians become more well-versed in treating conditions like depression and anxiety.

What's next? Boosting pediatric telemental health access will likely become a priority this year for not only the US gov't, but also telehealth vendors.

In addition to the HHS' moves to fund pediatric virtual care, some telehealth vendors have recognized the largely untapped market opportunity for pediatric mental health.

- This week, telehealth vendor **Brightline** announced it's expanding its virtual health platform to all 50 states to address the shortage of mental health providers.
- This news arrives a few months after **Walmart** acquired virtual care provider **MeMD**, which boasts teletherapy for kids ages 10-17 on its website.

An untapped opportunity: Teens often prefer communicating via texting rather than face-to-face—which means focusing on text-based therapy is a smart bet for telehealth vendors that want to boost engagement with younger patients.

Gen Zers (kids and teens 6+) are digital natives—and texting can create a more meaningful connection than video visits alone.

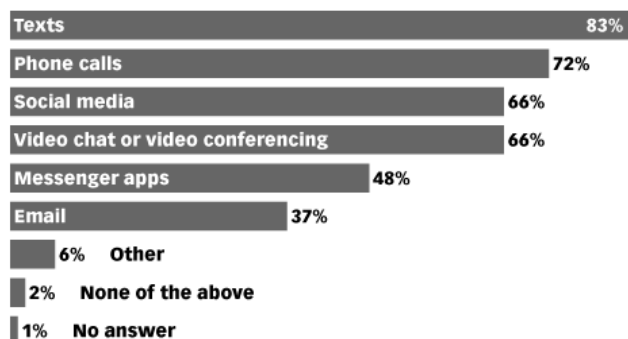
- About **83% of US teens** used texting to stay connected with family and friends during the pandemic, while **72% used phone calls** and other forms of communication, **per** an April 2020 study by CommonSense Media.
- Text-based therapy can serve as a tool to build and retain trust, since it can allow for more frequent touch points and a way to talk about topics they may feel anxious discussing over the phone.

A few telehealth vendors already offer text-based therapy for kids, but we could see giants like **Teladoc** hop on the bandwagon given early success with the format.

- For example, **98point6** offers text-based care for mental health conditions, which teens can access through their parents' employer-sponsored insurance.
- And **Talkspace** offers teens aged 13-17 a range of communication choices, including text-based messaging, audio, or video.
- And it appears their text-based approaches have paid off: Talkspace claims that in its latest study, **93% of participants** reported improvement on their mental health conditions within 2 months or more, for instance.

Technologies Used by US Teens to Stay Connected to Family/Friends They No Longer See In-Person due to the Coronavirus, April 2020

% of respondents



Note: ages 13-17

Source: Common Sense Media survey conducted by SurveyMonkey, April 8, 2020

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