Talking to Families: Telehealth for Children with Special Needs

A tip sheet on involving the whole family in telehealth care for children with complex needs

STEP 1: Prepare for your telehealth visit
Be familiar with each family’s communication needs before the appointment starts:
- Confirm the family has internet access and a computer, smartphone, or tablet to attend the virtual visit
- Ask the family if they will need assistive technology to communicate during a telehealth appointment
- Book a slightly longer telehealth appointment to account for delays or pauses in communication with a child

STEP 2: Speak directly to the child during the telehealth appointment
Ensure the child has an important role in their own health care:
- Greet the child by name and have everyone present introduce themselves
- Speak directly to the child during the virtual visit, even if the child is non-verbal
- Save time for the child to ask questions or share something that is important to them
- Involve the child in the decision making process whenever possible
- Recognize that some children may be distracted or unable to sit for an entire appointment

STEP 3: Use child-friendly communication techniques
Keep the child engaged and comfortable so they can be more involved in their care:
- Take time to celebrate the child’s successes and milestones
- Use props during the telehealth visit, such as toy animals, dolls, or colorful flashcards
- Encourage children to draw a picture while you chat with the parents or guardians and then share at the end of the telehealth appointment

STEP 4: Make sure the family has a clear plan for follow-up care
Ongoing partnerships between doctors and families give children the best chance to thrive:
- Follow up with any prescriptions, lab or imaging orders, or referrals
- Book a follow-up appointment, if necessary
- Schedule an in-person visit if the child was unable to participate in a telehealth appointment
- Ask the family if they have suggestions for improvement during the next telehealth visit

Extra Resource
Learn how to help families access telehealth services with the Family Advocate Telehealth Training course (https://www.familytelehealthtraining.org/)

Visit Telehealth.HHS.gov