



Developmental therapist includes student siblings as helpers in online coaching sessions



Jennifer Michael

Name and title: Jennifer Michael, developmental therapist and team manager.

Program and location: KIDSTEP, a division of SARAH Inc., in southern and eastern Connecticut.

Activity: Used her online coaching skills not only to help parents support the development of their infant or toddler but also to include older siblings in therapy sessions as helpers.

Story: Jennifer Michael, a developmental therapist and team manager with KIDSTEP in Connecticut, had the technological knowledge and hardware to quickly transition to online service delivery for the infants, toddlers, and families she would regularly meet with face-to-face before the coronavirus pandemic.

Last fall, KIDSTEP's early interventionists moved from a paper reporting system to an electronic program, allowing providers to type session notes into an online portal that could be shared automatically with parents. The providers were also equipped with mobile printers and training in videoconferencing.

"We were set up really well," Michael said.

Still, the transition was difficult for some providers and parents. For families who were hesitant about the virtual therapy sessions, Michael helped them understand that their child's sessions would be the same, individualized interventions they had been receiving in person.

In fact, Michael was able to provide even more customized services based on families' schedules and needs. For example, one family was experiencing difficulty with their toddler's nighttime bath routine. Michael was able to meet with the family virtually and observe the challenges.

Michael and the family discussed the difficulties and, at their next session, used Boardmaker Online to develop a visual schedule for bath time, incorporating the parents' suggestions for what pictures to use. At the following meeting, Michael coached the family on using the visual schedule. "It was so successful," she said.

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Through online service delivery, Michael discovered another asset she had rarely used before: The help of a child's older sibling. Older siblings were often at school when Michael used to visit babies' homes before the pandemic. With siblings now at home, parents have been eager to find ways their older children can productively support their younger brother or sister. Michael has encouraged siblings to hold the tablet for video calls and to provide snacks to their baby sister or brother.

"The parents have been so happy," she said. "It's important to me to say siblings don't have to be in another room."

Michael advised other early interventionists follow a family's lead and understand what their challenges are so they can problem-solve collectively. "Make sure you ask questions and go that extra step to understand the families' needs," she said.

Online early intervention has gone pretty smoothly for Michael, but she is taking a pause for the next few months to focus on just one infant -- her own baby born on April 29.

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