

Children and young people: Telepractice research project development

Experience of online / phone technologies

Introduction

On Sunday 20 June 2021 Fams conducted a focus group with members of the outgoing NSW Advocate for Children and Young People's Youth Advisory Council (YAC). The purpose of the focus group was to discuss what the group members think Fams needs to explore with children and young people of their experience of telepractice. The findings of this focus group will be used to develop a research study for the next phase of Fams' *Telepractice in family work study*, and will inform project refinement, including an application for ethics approval to conduct focus groups with children and young people.

This coding summary paper reports on the themes, including a summary of content of the focus group discussion related to the themes, and the YAC participants' suggestions for the line of questioning to take when collecting data. Upon analysis, comments relate to three themes of the experience of using online and phone technologies (that is, telepractice) deemed to require further exploration, and one theme for suggestions when designing the data collection for the study. Themes regarding children and young people's experience of telepractice relate to using such technologies, impacts of using these, and comparing using online and phone technologies with face-to-face practice.

Using online / phone technologies

Personal circumstances

The YAC participants talked about how it is important initially to capture some background from people related to how comfortable they feel using online / phone technologies. They identified possible aspects of people's personal situation that are important contextual factors to include, in order to more fully understand the experience / impacts of using online / phone technologies. This includes aspects such as introversion/extroversion, and fears/anxieties [or not] when doing things over the internet and phone. Furthermore, some participants argued that adults make assumptions about children and young people and technology, and assume children and young people are familiar, comfortable, and competent with engaging online and over the phone. They noted that these issues need further exploration.

Suggested approach to questioning:

- Describe how having to do everything online and using phone technologies affected you, and how you managed these effects when they came up.
- What kinds of assumptions did you experience about using online and phone technologies? Describe how this affected you.

Types of activities

YAC participants talked about exploring the experience of using online / phone technologies in terms of the common types of activities children and young people engage in. They suggested breaking

down exploration of the experience of online and phone technologies into affected areas of life, and then exploring how using online / phone technologies related to a variety of things; such as, change, comfort level, barriers/challenges, benefits, etc. The participants also raised the subject of access issues children and young people experience when engaging using online and phone technologies.

Suggested common types of aspects of life children and young people engage in, to explore, include:

- Educational activities
- Health activities – physical and mental/emotional welling
- Family
- Social
- Recreational
- Civic engagement (e.g. volunteering, representative activities)
- Self / Personal development (e.g. mentoring)

Suggested approach to questioning when exploring the experience of using online and phone technologies include:

- Describe your experience of engaging in [type of activity] activities using online and phone technologies.
- Describe how engaging in [type of activity] using online and phone technologies affected your wellbeing, including efforts to change your wellbeing and personal circumstances.
- Explore how engaging in [type of activity] using online and phone technologies compared to engaging in the same kinds of activities face-to-face.
- How did your living situation affect your experience of engaging in [type of activity] using online and phone technologies?
- Explore aspects such as level of comfort, barriers/challenges, benefits and how using online and phone technologies impacted you?

Suggested approach to questioning regarding experiences of accessing online and phone technologies include:

- Describe issues you experienced related to accessing everything you needed over online and phone technologies? Describe your experience of these technology-related issues using online and phone technologies. And, how did these impact on your wellbeing?
- Discuss things you needed, but could not access, using online and phone technologies. How did this impact you?

Choice and power

The YAC participants noted that children and young people have less power than adults over their personal environment. They said this is due to the adult-centric nature of social systems and relationships. According to the YAC participants, under the pandemic circumstances, this manifested as children and young people having no real choice regarding how they can relate and communicate. Some argued that this has contributed to poor mental health amongst some children and young people. The participants argued that there are some things that children and young people think should not be done using online and phone technologies that need further exploration. The suggested approach to questioning includes:

- Describe the difference that having freedom and capacity to choose made to your experience of using online and phone technologies?

- How did needing to do everything via online and phone technologies impact your sense of empowerment and choice? Describe your experiences and how this impacted your wellbeing.
- How did you regain a little power/choice over getting your needs met, and improving your wellbeing, when everything was done using online and phone technologies?
- Describe your experience when service providers would only engage using online and phone technologies, but you preferred face-to-face options.
- When being required to do everything using online and phone technologies, how did services change their way of working with you to help you achieve mental/emotional wellbeing?
- Describe what you think should not be offered using online and phone technologies, and why you think this?

Impacts of using online / phone technologies

The YAC participants reported concern about the current and future implications of attending services using online and phone technologies, rather than face-to-face, on matters related to the self, and to the social experience. Regarding impacts on self, participants noted that having no real choice regarding how you can relate and communicate affects mental health. One participant reported a sense that everything was going “inwards”. While in the context of the (limited) conversation, this seemed to be about mental health, it could also have been interpreted as being related to the habit of face-to-face engagement. Hence, children and young people’s perceptions on the impact of using online and phone technologies needs further exploration.

Moreover, the YAC participants noted it was important to further explore the impacts of using online and phone technologies on children and young peoples’ social experience. For example, some noted that human-to-human connections are integral for young people, but experienced differently when using online and phone technologies. Furthermore, some participants reported their experiences of not being able to become fully involved in activities they used to (which one participant argued ruined the experience). Others discussed how using online and phone technologies impacted their capacity to engage to the extent wanted to, and were used to. They argued these ideas need further exploration.

The self

The YAC participants outlined a number of aspects for exploration on matters related to the self, that require further exploration, such as:

- Sense of self
- Behavioural considerations
- Physical and mental / emotional health and wellbeing
 - Safety
 - Privacy
- Learning and development experience
 - Developing and refining relationship and communication skills
 - Learn new ideas/concepts and to practice these
 - Engage in self development

Suggested approach to questioning:

- Describe your experience of discussing deep/serious matters using online and phone technologies. How did this compare to doing the same face-to-face? How did this impact you?
- Describe your experience of achieving emotional safety and wellbeing over telepractice. How did telepractice impact your experience? Explore how this compared to achieving emotional safety and wellbeing when you can meet face-to-face.
- Describe your experience of anxiety and overwhelm using online and phone technologies. How did this compare to doing the same face-to-face? How did this impact you?
- When needing to vent/debrief, what did you do to find privacy when engaging using online and phone technologies if you could not find it at home?
- When communicating using online and phone technologies, what issues arose related safety? Describe how these affected you and your experience of:
 - Social relationships
 - Emotional health
 - Service delivery
 - Mental wellbeing
- When having to do everything using online and phone technologies, what issues arose related to privacy? Describe how these affected you and your experience of:
 - Social relationships
 - Emotional health
 - Service delivery
 - Mental wellbeing
 - Family relationships
 - Your home/living environment
 - Learning and development

Social experience

Based on what the YAC participants said, face-to-face social interaction is very important to young people. They noted that school, sport and youth services fulfil a socialisation role, which was deemed necessary for positive mental health. They further argued that young people need to get out of the home/living environment, and mix with other young people. This is because their home/living environment is not entirely their free space; rather, it is shared space and, ultimately, their parents'/carers' space. Furthermore, some YAC participants noted that being able to go to face-to-face supports and activities (including sport) is also a shared space, but more of a young people-centric space. According to the YAC participants, limits on face-to-face social experiences leads to safety, privacy and mental health issues because young people cannot safely and privately offload their frustrations, and debrief (as raised in the sub-theme on 'the self').

On matters related to their social experience, including their experience of relationships, and of the impacts of using online and phone technologies on their relationships and communication skills, the suggested approach to questioning includes:

- If engaging face-to-face is considered important, why is it considered so?
- Describe what being able to engage with young people face-to-face means for you? Why?
- How do you "escape" when having to primarily use online and phone technologies? How does this compare to how you could "escape" when you could also choose a face-to-face option?

- How has doing everything using online and phone technologies affected your experience related to creating human connections?
 - Face-to-face connections
 - Virtual/online connections
- How did telepractice affect your relationships with?
 - Family – immediate and extended
 - Friends
 - Educators
 - Other young people you do not consider friends (e.g. team mates, class mates, etc)
 - Health and social welfare service providers
- How did relationships change during times when you could only engage with people using online and phone technologies?
- How has doing everything using online and phone technologies affected your experience related to engagement in social activities?

Relationship and communication skills

According to some of the YAC participants, the experience using online and phone technologies changed how they relate face-to-face with people. For example, some said they had lost the habit of engaging face-to-face when everything involved using online and phone technologies. Some also argued that the extent to which they had to relate using online and phone technologies all the time has resulted in fatigued with relating that way, which has impacted their relating and communication skills. They thought these issues would be worth further exploration, and noted it would be beneficial to explore difference cross relational types, for example:

- Family
- Friends
- Other young people they do not consider friends (e.g. team mates, class mates, etc)
- Professional services workers
- Educators
- Medical practitioners
- Sports (eg coaches)
- Mentoring

Suggested approach to questioning regarding relationship skills includes:

- How has doing everything using online and phone technologies affected your capacity to engaging in relationships?
- Describe your experience of relational literacy when using online and phone technologies
- How did this compare to doing the same face-to-face? How did this impact you?

Suggested approach to questioning regarding communication skills includes:

- Describe how the experience of doing everything using online and phone technologies affected your communication experience.
- Describe how the experience of how doing everything using online and phone technologies changed your ability to engage in meaningful conversations.

Comparison of using online / phone technologies with face-to-face

The YAC participants stated that we need to better understand what is different for children and people when comparing experiences of face-to-face with telepractice. The suggested approach to questioning included focusing on differences related to the self, social experience, and relationship

and communication skills. Suggested general questions to ask to compare the experience of face-to-face with telepractice include:

- What was different?
- How was it different?
- Why was it different?
- What was the impact of that difference?

Focus groups

The YAC participants suggested that those running the focus groups:

- start the focus groups with an explanation of some definitions of key ideas related to what they are trying to explore; and
- make sure they are asking about the different experiences between people living in regional and metropolitan locations.

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