

## **Creative Interventions for Online Therapy with Children: Techniques to Build Rapport**

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**NOTE: This article is for mental health professionals who have been properly trained in providing online therapy to children. Guidelines on providing online therapy is beyond the scope of this article. Therefore, I have included a short list of [teletherapy resources](#) that I have found helpful. Scroll down to see this list.**

In the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, many child therapists are shifting their clinical practice to online sessions. While there are many issues to consider when conducting online therapy, one of the most important is how to build and maintain a safe and positive therapeutic rapport. This can be particularly challenging when therapist and child are in different physical locations and there is a screen separating them. This article outlines several “online-friendly” interventions to facilitate rapport-building with children.

Relational components including empathy, warmth, and therapeutic presence, are essential when conducting face to face therapy. However, when doing online therapy, the practitioner must be even more vigilant to ensure they are empathically attuned throughout the entire online session. It is important to convey warmth via facial expression and voice tone. When conducting online therapy with children, an added element to consider is creating a level of playfulness (i.e., wear a wacky hat, hold a puppet, have a child-friendly backdrop).

### **Teletherapy Interventions**

#### **All About Me Show and Tell (Ages 6-10)**

**Source: Arkell, in *Assessment and Treatment Activities for Children, Adolescents, and Families Volume Two*, Edited by Lowenstein, 2010, page 2**

Explain to the child, “We’re going to do an activity called ‘All About Me Show and Tell.’ I’d like you to go get something in your room (or home) that’s important to you, and bring it back to show me. Then we’ll play ‘SHOW and TELL (you will SHOW me the item and TELL me about it). The item might be a favorite toy, stuffed animal, photo, something you made, an item from a collection, or an award you won. You have 1 minute to go find the item and bring it back to show me.”

Allow the child ample time to show and discuss the item. Ask exploratory questions about the item to show an interest and to further engage the child.

Younger children will require the assistance of a parent to appropriately move away from the screen as they go find the item.

#### **Rock, Paper, Scissors (Ages 4-10)**

**Source: *Structured Play-Based Interventions for Engaging Children and Adolescents in Therapy*, Cavett, 2010, page 8**

Therapist and child each make a fist with one hand and they tap their fists once, twice, and on the third time form one of three items: A rock (by keeping the hand in a fist), a sheet of paper

(by holding the hand flat, palm down), or a pair of scissors (by extending the first two fingers and holding them apart). The winner of that round depends on the items formed. If the same item is formed, it's a tie. If a rock and scissors are formed, the rock wins, because a rock can smash scissors. If scissors and paper are formed, the scissors win, because scissors can cut paper. If paper and a rock are formed, the paper wins, because a sheet of paper can cover a rock.

In this adapted version of the game, play Rock, Paper Scissors. The winner gets to ask the other person a question (see sample questions below). Since this is a rapport-building activity, the questions should be easy to answer and require minimal emotional risk-taking.

Some children might have difficulty coming up with questions to ask the therapist. As such, prior to the session, it is recommended to cut out the questions, place them in a bag, and the child can decide whether to devise their own question, or have the therapist pick a question to answer from the bag.

### Sample Questions

What's one of your favorite colors?  
What's one of your favorite animals?  
What's one of your favorite toys?  
What's one of your favorite TV programs?  
What's one of your favorite movies?  
What's one of your favorite breakfast foods?  
What's one of your favorite snack foods?  
What's one of your favorite desserts?  
What's one of your favorite flavors of ice cream?  
What's a food you really hate?  
What's one of your favorite books?  
Who is one of your favorite TV characters?  
What's one of the best gifts you ever received?

### **Five Favorites (Ages 6-12)**

**Source: *Creative CBT Interventions for Children with Anxiety*, Lowenstein, 2016, page 28**

Prior to the session, cut out the five game cards (see sample questions below), fold each card, and place the cards in a paper bag.

### Sample Game Cards

Favorite color  
Favorite food  
Favorite TV show  
Favorite animal  
Favorite movie

Explain to the child, "Let's play the Five Favorites game. To play, I will pick a game card from the bag and we will take turns sharing with each other our favorite things. For example, if I pick from the bag the card that says "favorite animal," then we'll take turns saying our favorite animal. The game ends after we've picked all five cards from the bag and answered all five questions."

### **Jump (Ages 4-8)**

**Source: Lowenstein, unpublished.**

Explain to the child, "We are going to stand in front of our screens so we can both see each other. I'm going to ask you some questions, and if the answer to the question is YES, then you will jump up and down two times, if the answer to the question is NO, then you will stand still. For example, if the question is: 'Jump up and down two times if you have a pet' then you will jump up and down two times if you have a pet, and you will stand still if you do not have a pet.

#### Sample Questions

Jump up and down two times if you are wearing socks  
Jump up and down two times if you have brown hair  
Jump up and down two times if you have an older sister  
Jump up and down two times if you hate broccoli  
Jump up and down two times if you are wearing the color blue  
Jump up and down two times if you have a pet  
Jump up and down two times if you love chocolate  
Jump up and down two times if you like the color green  
Jump up and down two times if you like to build stuff with Lego  
Jump up and down two times if you are wearing shoes  
Jump up and down two times if you like ice cream  
Jump up and down two times if you have a younger brother  
Jump up and down two times if your name starts with the letter J  
Jump up and down two times if you have ten fingers and ten toes  
Jump up and down two times if you are in grade 2  
Jump up and down two times if you like ice cream

### **Copy Me (Ages 4-8)**

**Source: Unknown.**

Explain to the child, "We are going to stand in front of our screens so we can both see each other. I'm going to clap my hands in a certain way, then you have to copy me. For example, if I clap my hands three times softly, then you have to clap your hands three times softly. We'll play a few rounds."

Variations: Make a funny face for the child to copy. Make a funny body movement for the child to copy.

### **Truth, Lie, Wish (Ages 10+)**

**Source: LaRochelle, in *Assessment and Treatment Activities for Children, Adolescents, and Families Volume Three*, Edited by Lowenstein, 2011, page 36**

Therapist and child will each need a piece of paper and something to write with.

Explain to the child, "We're going to play a game that requires excellent detective skills. There are three categories of the game: truth, lie, and wish. You and I will each write down one thing that is true about ourselves, one thing that is not true about ourselves, and one thing that we

wish for. For example: I have a dog. My favorite color is pink. I am going to Disneyland. You must guess which statement is the truth, which one is a lie, and which one is a wish.

Let's begin by writing on our paper:

TRUTH:

LIE:

WISH:

It's important that we cannot see each other's paper while we are writing our answers. Once we have both written our answers on the sheet of paper, we will take turns reading what we have written, and the other person will try and guess which statement is the truth, which one is the lie, and which one is the wish. It's important to read what you wrote in a different order, to make it harder for me to guess which statement is the truth, which one is the lie, and which one is the wish. For example, you might first read what you wrote for LIE, then you might read what you wrote for WISH, then you might read what you wrote for TRUTH."

Following the reading of all the statements, the practitioner can ask process questions such as:

1. Which statement was the funniest?
2. Which statement was the most surprising?
3. Which statement was the hardest to guess?

### **Funny Faces (Ages 8-12)**

**Source: Snailham, in *Assessment and Treatment Activities for Children, Adolescents, and Families Volume Three*, Edited by Lowenstein, 2011, page 2**

Therapist and child will each need a piece of paper and something to write with.

Explain to the child, "We are going to sit in front of our screens so I can clearly see your face and you can clearly see my face. We are going to try and draw each other's faces but the rule is we have to look at each other and can't look at our drawings until both our drawings are finished. We're going to draw each other at the same time. We will start drawing when I say GO!"

As the drawing begins, the child usually tries to peek at their drawing and this usually creates a lot of laughter as the practitioner keeps reminding the child of the no peeking rule.

When the practitioner and child are both done, they hold up what they have drawn and this usually creates more laughter.

The practitioner and child can then discuss what parts of the drawing look most / least like the other person.

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## Teletherapy Resources

Teleplay YouTube video, Rachel Alvater:

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kmZJdC0eTbc&fbclid=IwAR03zdzOKwrR0BT-CO3rV-eINeT2mBhoaM\\_6bxd0OHGiiBcLgulQKiYaBqk](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kmZJdC0eTbc&fbclid=IwAR03zdzOKwrR0BT-CO3rV-eINeT2mBhoaM_6bxd0OHGiiBcLgulQKiYaBqk)

Teleplay Webinar, Karen Wolfe:

<https://www.sfbayplaytherapy.com/trainings-for-therapists.html>

Toolkit for e-Mental Health Implementation, Mental Health Commission of Canada:

[https://www.mentalhealthcommission.ca/sites/default/files/2018-09/E\\_Mental\\_Health\\_Implementation\\_Toolkit\\_2018\\_eng.pdf?fbclid=IwAR3y9upJH730-e8rPAR8198xLT5e7dhAZ7PBNvtC-zOC2p0D6-UZNWqMp1I](https://www.mentalhealthcommission.ca/sites/default/files/2018-09/E_Mental_Health_Implementation_Toolkit_2018_eng.pdf?fbclid=IwAR3y9upJH730-e8rPAR8198xLT5e7dhAZ7PBNvtC-zOC2p0D6-UZNWqMp1I)

Guidelines for Uses of Technology in Counselling and Psychotherapy, Canadian Counseling and Psychotherapy Association, Dawn Schell:

[https://www.ccpa-accp.ca/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/TISCGuidelines\\_Mar2019\\_EN.pdf](https://www.ccpa-accp.ca/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/TISCGuidelines_Mar2019_EN.pdf)

Guidelines for the Practice of Telepsychology, American Psychological Association:

<https://www.apa.org/practice/guidelines/telepsychology>

YouTube Videos on Teleplay, Tammi Van Hollander:

<https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCStWuSv69IHxXDF-xUJoVPw>

Transitioning Child Clients to Teleplay, Ann Meehan:

[https://www.meehanmentalhealth.com/the-playful-therapist-blog/transitioning-child-clients-from-office-sessions-to-telemental-health?fbclid=IwAR2kpmJ\\_htTNyOyHqUunKc-sFVE0vHPxqDpxArHuMF0A2DI6qYneaVHVszU](https://www.meehanmentalhealth.com/the-playful-therapist-blog/transitioning-child-clients-from-office-sessions-to-telemental-health?fbclid=IwAR2kpmJ_htTNyOyHqUunKc-sFVE0vHPxqDpxArHuMF0A2DI6qYneaVHVszU)

20 Teleplay Activities, Ann Meehan:

<https://www.meehanmentalhealth.com/the-playful-therapist-blog/telemental-health-and-children-20-free-minimal-supply-activities>

Guidance Teletherapy: Interventions for online therapy with children and youth:

[https://www.guidancett.com/blog/interventions-for-online-therapy-with-children-and-youth-2020?fbclid=IwAR1tczMkxXa9\\_FtWptTaLliOrCCHKiYy44e\\_jlblwqiZJGin904HvoRR-ag](https://www.guidancett.com/blog/interventions-for-online-therapy-with-children-and-youth-2020?fbclid=IwAR1tczMkxXa9_FtWptTaLliOrCCHKiYy44e_jlblwqiZJGin904HvoRR-ag)

If Tech Gets Glitchy, Person Centered Tech:

<https://personcenteredtech.com/2016/05/27/online-therapy-video-sessions-go-glitchy-tips/>

