

## **Easterseals Offers School-Based Therapy and Virtual Learning Tips**

Easterseals is best known for our outpatient services in Wheeling and Steubenville, but we also provide school-based occupational and physical therapy. Ten of our therapists treat students in West Virginia and Ohio districts, from Brooke to Jackson County and Jefferson to Belmont. This month, we're highlighting in-school therapy as well as ways to help your children get the most out of telehealth and virtual learning.

### **School-Based Therapy**

As little as 50 years ago, it was against the law in some states for children with certain disabilities to attend public school. Millions of children were sent to segregated facilities, while others had no access to public education. Thankfully, Congress corrected this injustice, and today, more than 7.5 million children benefit from the landmark civil rights measure.

Since 1975, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) has made free appropriate public education available to children with special needs. The law recognizes that "disability is a natural part of the human experience and in no way diminishes the right of individuals to participate in or contribute to society."

One of the requirements of the IDEA is that public schools create an individualized education program (IEP) for every child that is eligible for special education. IEPs are designed to help children succeed across the academic environment and provide an equal opportunity for students to be educated with necessary modifications. Creating an IEP is a team effort between parents and district personnel, including Easterseals therapists. The document includes the child's performance level, annual goals, accommodations, and individualized instruction.

The IDEA also requires that related services like speech, occupational, and physical therapy are provided in the school setting. Children needing school-based therapy have disabilities or special needs that affect their educational performance, including developmental, academic, and functional skills. For example, school therapy may help students with handwriting or navigating the school environment. Therapy may also help students address challenges associated with learning disabilities that can't be recreated outside of a school setting. Depending on the child's needs, therapists work in and out of the classroom, typically referred to as *push-in* or *pull-out* therapy.

Students may have special needs that do not impact their educational program. In that case, outpatient pediatric therapy at Easterseals would help to support the child's development. A student may also benefit from therapy in both settings. Services can't be duplicated for insurance purposes, but having different treatment goals may be appropriate. A child may receive occupational therapy at school to help with handwriting and as outpatient care to work on activities of daily living.

Our therapists assist in closing the gaps between school and clinical care by serving clients in both environments. Additionally, Easterseals offers summer services to supplement children's IEPs and decrease the chance of students regressing while they are out of school.

"By working in both settings, we see the needs and requirements for kids in schools and can carry over that knowledge in our outpatient therapy," explained Mary Conley, occupational therapist at Easterseals. "It gives us a better perspective of the needs of the pediatric population in the Ohio Valley, which helps us adapt and evolve to better serve our clients."

Parents with concerns can request an evaluation to see if the child is eligible for school-based therapy.

### **Virtual Learning & Therapy**

This year has created new challenges for both school and outpatient therapy. However, our therapists have adapted to help clients as much as possible, with telehealth playing a major role.

Virtual therapy lets children work toward their goals within their natural environment. While it is not ideal for all ages or all types of treatment, there are many ways that children can practice skills using basic household items. Stacking cups for fine motor needs, standing on pillows for balance, and creating a simple obstacle course are all ways of doing therapy at home. Telehealth is a great opportunity for parents to be hands-on and to learn from the therapists so they can continue practicing with their children between sessions.

As virtual learning continues to be a prominent part of this school year, our therapists recognize the impacts that sitting at a computer may have on developing children. They compiled helpful tips for parents to keep in mind:

- Practice handwriting and other fine motor skills that are neglected out of the classroom.
- Consider appropriate posture (i.e., put a pillow behind the child, prop the child up to be level with the table).
- Position screens based on the child's natural line of sight.
- Take screen breaks to reduce eye fatigue.
- Break for gross motor activities like jumping jacks to help improve attention.
- Stretch neck and back muscles.

Most importantly, if you notice delays or have concerns, contact your child's doctor and ask how Easterseals can help.