

# SNAPSHOT:

## Youth Share Their Thoughts About Telemental Health During COVID and Beyond

APRIL 2021



In January and February 2021, the California Children’s Trust interviewed 14 young people who are covered by Medi-Cal to learn more about their experiences with digital mental health services during the pandemic. Their perspectives complement interviews with a dozen Medi-Cal providers, and not surprisingly, many of their recommendations align.

The young people offered valuable insights which can help inform how California implements telehealth in Medi-Cal after the COVID-19 public health emergency. Their experiences can also inform mental health policy in Medi-Cal.

### KEY TAKE-AWAYS:

- ⇒ Young people want a say in when and how they get mental health services. They want to be offered a variety of options (in-person, digital and hybrid) and select what works for them, together with their provider.
- ⇒ Texting is vital to youth mental health—it helps them keep in touch and tap “in the moment” support.
- ⇒ Young people want to support other youths’ mental health in meaningful ways using technology.
- ⇒ Young people are more likely to use digital mental health tools when offered by someone they know from their school, the place where they spend so much of their time.
- ⇒ When young people reach out for help, the system needs to respond faster using technology, and with cultural compassion.

### CCT FRAMEWORK FOR SOLUTIONS



**California  
Children's  
Trust**

The California Children’s Trust (The Trust) is a statewide initiative to reinvent our state’s approach to children’s social, emotional, and developmental health. We work to transform the administration, delivery, and financing of child-serving systems to ensure that they are equity driven and accountable for improved outcomes. The Trust regularly presents its Framework for Solutions and policy recommendations in statewide and national forums. Learn more at [cachildrenstrust.org](http://cachildrenstrust.org).

**Young people want a say in when and how they get mental health services. They want to be offered a variety of options (in-person, digital and hybrid) and select what works for them, together with their provider.**

“I have social anxiety. In group [therapy sessions] during COVID, they want you to have your camera on, but you don’t have to show your full self— you can lie down, or be partially in the frame. I usually show half my face because I just woke up and don’t have my makeup on and have acne patches (not cute) and the lighting is tough. They encourage you to bring your animal and I always have my cat on screen with me.”

—J, 17, Fremont, Mixed race

“A hybrid approach—video + in-person—would be good after COVID-19. I definitely want to see my therapist in-person sometimes— it’s a private space, and I can be more genuine. I do my video chats from home in my room, and am worried about my family eavesdropping.”

—Z, 15, Murietta, Mixed race

**Texting is vital to youth mental health— it helps them keep in touch and tap “in the moment” support.**

“If I’m struggling on any particular day with my issues, I reach out to my therapist first via text because I know she’ll get back to me as soon as she can. She will text with me and stay on the thread as long as I need to get stable and go on with my day.”

—G, Oakland, 20, African-American

“If I can’t talk to her the moment I need her then it feels like I have no one. I get anxious and I’ve got PTSD and I feel alone and then the person I need isn’t responding. My counselor always responds faster with text than phone or email.”

—R, 14, Los Angeles, Mixed Race

**Young people want to support other youths’ mental health in meaningful ways using technology.**

“I saw an ad on Instagram that said you can help people; learn what other youth are going through and if it’s similar to you. I signed up because I wanted to help.”

—S, 17, Ontario, Hispanic

“I used to self-harm daily. Now I use the “IamSober” app, which is more for adult substance use, and then check in with my peer group chat via text message to celebrate how many days I am “self-harm free.”

—K, 17, Sacramento, African-American

“I text my group every day to see how everyone is doing— text in morning (good morning) and afternoon and night time. It takes about 20-30 minutes of my day total. ”

—C, 14, Lakeside, White

**Young people are more likely to use digital mental health tools when offered by someone they know from their school, the place where they spend so much of their time.**

“Before, my school counselor was college-oriented, and stressful/hard core; I was never that comfortable with him in person. Now, over video, it’s more gentle and focused on helping with my personal issues. I can email him in the morning and say I have a quick question, what should I do? And he sets up a google meet for 10 minutes to talk about whatever it is. He’s available extra hours, during lunch, before school, and it’s easier to talk to him using technology.”

—G, 17, San Francisco, white

“I’ve used my school-based health center; I used it to get papers signed so I could participate in sports and activities. If they sent me something to fill out to get free counseling via Zoom, I’d do that.”

—A, 17, Stockton, African-American

“My school counselor has reached out when I struggled in class, and reminded me to take it one step at a time. I like that I can talk to my counselor and teacher directly; I just reach out through the school email/Canvas platform, it’s like any other messaging I do with my friends.”

—S, 17, Ontario, Hispanic

**When young people reach out for help, the system needs to respond faster using technology, and with cultural compassion.**

“I was in counseling at high school. I went twice a week because I was experiencing anxiety as my parents were going through a divorce. I started college Fall 2020 at a California state college, living on campus and feeling isolated because of the pandemic, and I couldn’t meet any new people, couldn’t see family, classes were challenging. I experienced bad depression with where the world is at and where I was within it all. I reached out to the college counseling services and was told the wait time to determine my eligibility was three weeks. Then I saw an Instagram post from Dream—a community youth health center—about free counseling. I signed up and saw a wonderful therapist (who I’m still seeing!) within 48 hours.”

—V, 18, Oakland, Latina

The California Children’s Trust thanks the youth who were interviewed for this snapshot. Their insights and personal stories have already informed the policy discussion in California. In February 2021, two interviewees delivered testimony at a California Assembly Health Committee hearing on telehealth. As the only youth to speak, they offered perspectives on text messaging and audio-only communication as valuable channels in youth telemental health.

The Trust is committed to including youth perspectives in our research, reports, and presentations and to leveraging youth voices. The Trust recognizes the value of this contribution by compensating young people for their time and wisdom through the CCT Youth Fellows program, a partnership with California Coalition for Youth.

The Trust also thanks Deb Levine for conducting all of the youth interviews and contributing her knowledge, insights, and content to this snapshot.