**Association for Education and Rehabilitation of the Blind**

**and Visually Impaired (AER) Position Paper:**

# Remote Instruction for Orientation and Mobility (O&M)

*Position paper including guidelines and suggested activities*

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# Position Statement

The standard of practice in orientation and mobility is in-person instruction, and it is the position of the Division that when conducted safely, remote instruction, also known as telepractice, can be a viable service delivery method for some components of orientation and mobility (O&M) instruction. This paper provides guidelines and suggestions for developing and delivering remote O&M instruction to meet the needs of learners. As described in the paper, there are some aspects of O&M instruction that may be unsuitable for remote instruction due to the inability to monitor the safety and progress of learners.

# Introduction

The field of Orientation and Mobility (O&M) has evolved and continues to evolve. For example, for many years university preparation of O&M specialists was conducted in traditional campus settings but, over time, universities developed teaching strategies that utilized forms of distance learning. As virtual teaching platforms improved and became more prevalent in society, the instructional capabilities also improved and continue to improve to support universally-designed learning (Ajuwon & Craig, 2007).

It is only logical that teaching learners using virtual platforms would eventually be considered a viable option for teaching certain orientation and mobility skills to learners who are blind, deafblind, or visually impaired. One by-product of COVID-19 has been an acceleration of this process (Rosenblum et. al, 2020). Throughout the pandemic, the U.S. Department of Education has re-stated its commitment to the delivery of Free and Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) law for students with disabilities regardless of the instructional mode. As was outlined in recent policy guidance, “FAPE may include, as appropriate, special education and related services provided through distance instruction provided virtually, online, or telephonically.” (U.S. Department of Education, 2020, p.1-2). Likewise, the Rehabilitation Services Administration (RSA) strongly encouraged the use of virtual or remote consultation services when in-person instruction was restricted due to the health crisis (RSA, 2020).

With increased positive exposure, the concept of O&M training conducted remotely will become more embedded in society over time. Developing best practices will assist in this process. This document is a step in achieving this outcome.

# Instructional Activities

Though each individual learner will have different abilities and needs, the following are general guides for considering activities that may be appropriate based on the learner's present level of independence. Cognitive ability, communication skills and modality, physical ability, risk awareness, and frustration tolerance, are just a few areas to consider when determining if the activities listed match or align with what is appropriate for each learner. Orientation and Mobility Specialists will need to use their professional judgment in determining whether a learner is truly able to perform these activities with the level of independence noted for each category.

## While in-person lessons remain the standard of practice, there are many situations in which remote instruction supports concept development as well as continuity in services:

* When learners are not able to be present in the traditional instructional setting due to illness or recovering from surgery
* Instances where geographic distance or extreme weather creates conditions where in-person instruction would be delivered very infrequently (Deverell et al., 2020; Parker & Tellefson, 2019).
* Connecting multiple learners across locations, or even states and countries, to share and learn together.
* Opportunity to observe interaction with other family members living in the same location (Dewald & Smyth, 2014)
* Encouraging use of technology that will likely be used throughout a person’s life, in personal and vocational settings (Siu, 2020).
* Teaching learners whose anxiety makes in-person environmentally based experiences overwhelming and to allow learners to develop greater rapport and trust with instructors (Jacobson & Bradley, 2010; Sauerburger, 2020).
* Preliminary opportunities to virtually or through simulation experience situations or environments that may involve higher levels of risk in-person than the learner is prepared for or that may be challenging to access (Jacobson & Bradley, 2010; Sauerburger, 2020).

## Various remote instructional activities can be developed for learners, such as:

* Teaching concepts and providing information
* Developing sensory awareness, such as listening skills (Sauerburger, 2020).
* Practice in problem-solving
* Working with learners to determine their needs and develop goals for their training.
* Reviewing maps, investigating public and private transportation options, environmental features, etc. for planning routes
* Introduction to apps on a smartphone
* Planning bus or other transit lessons
* Role playing
* Learning about advocacy (e.g. installation of ​​Accessible Pedestrian Signals APS)
* Virtual or simulated travel experiences to build confidence and reduce anxiety
* Partnership with family members or caregivers, using developmentally-appropriate O&M strategies within natural family routines (Dewald & Smyth 2014).
* Collaborative sessions with allied professionals (Godfrey-Lehrer et al 2020).
* Engagement in virtual games that reinforce O&M concepts, sensory skills, vocabulary, and dialogue.

## Remote instruction may be *one* component of a complete O&M program. It may be an option as long as:

* Safety of the learner is included in all aspects of planning and service delivery.
* It is done with consent of the learner (and his or her family, if appropriate) (Battistin et. al, 2021)
* The learner is able to make progress in these conditions.
* Connectivity is stable and available to promote continuity for learning (Barrett-Lennard, 2016).
* Technology and/or assistance is reliable (Deverell et al., 2020).
* Agency or school guidelines regarding privacy, confidentiality and mandatory reporting are considered.
* Consideration is given to whether support from an assistant at the location of the learner is necessary for safety (Barrett-Lennard, 2016).
* Consideration is given to providing information and experience in a way that is accessible and meaningful to the learner.
* Risk assessment is conducted to anticipate potential hazards and identify precautions for addressing identified risk/s (Marshet al., 2000; Russell et al, 2018; Sauerburger, n.d.).
* Planning is conducted to address potential differences in components that typically exist during in-person instruction.
  + Synchronicity and joint attention
  + Immediacy, proximity, and responsiveness
  + Access to rich sensory experiences, including kinesthetic information about moving through space and time
  + Access to relevant environmental information
  + Awareness of physical or communication behaviors
* Remote instruction is not used as a substitute for in-person learning solely for convenience or as a cost savings measure (Parker & Tellefson, 2019).

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