



# Improving Access to Autism Assessment and Intervention Through Telehealth

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## Overview of Issue

- Autism spectrum disorder (ASD) is a neurodevelopmental disability characterized by challenges with social communication and restricted and repetitive behaviors/interests
- The prevalence of ASD continues to increase, yet access to diagnostic assessment, intervention, and consultation does not meet this demand
- In Wisconsin, ASD assessment and intervention services are largely provided face-to-face in clinic settings or limited in-home services
- Scarce resources in rural areas contribute to families not being able to access services or being required to travel long distances
- This poster presents results of a **literature review** providing evidence that telehealth is a promising method of ASD service delivery for a range of services (assessment, intervention, consultation)

## Advantages of Telehealth

**Telemedicine** is the use of electronic communications and information technologies to provide clinical services when participants are at different locations.

**Telehealth** is a broader application of technologies to distance education, consumer outreach, and other applications utilizing electronic communications and information technologies to support healthcare services.

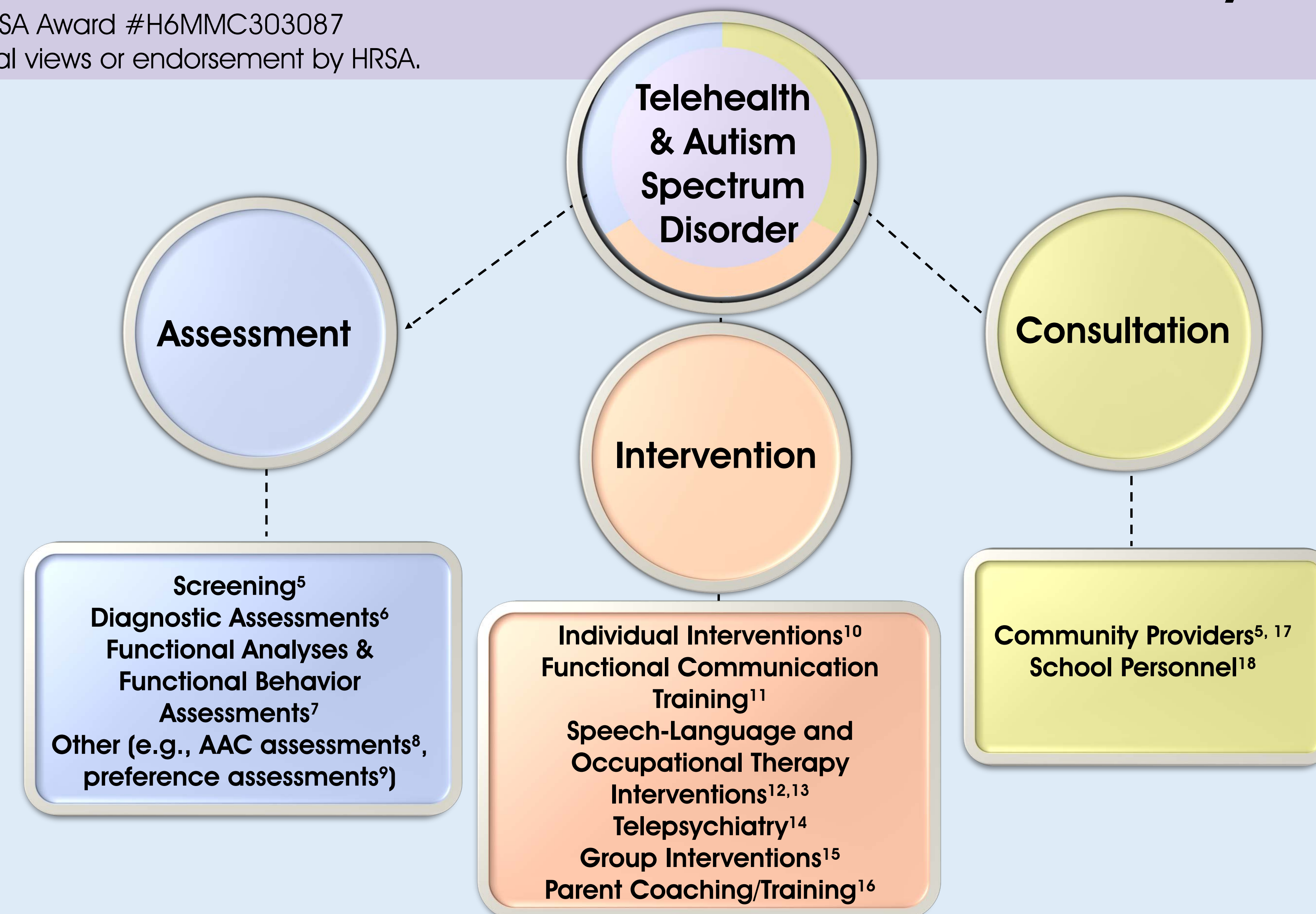
### Advantages of using telehealth include:

- Allowing providers to use clinical time in the most appropriate and impactful way
- Being a cost-effective method for patients to obtain high-quality healthcare, with cost savings for both healthcare systems as well as individual families<sup>1,2,3</sup>
- Improving patient outcomes over standard of care practice for some areas of medicine<sup>1</sup>

### Telehealth and ASD:

- Telehealth has been utilized for multiple facets of service delivery for individuals with ASD, including both reimbursable and non-reimbursable services:
  - Direct provider care with a patient and/or family, including assessment and intervention
  - Specialty care providers training and consulting with other professionals to expand community-based knowledge and expertise (e.g., school teams, primary care physicians)
- Studies have supported the potential **effectiveness** and **feasibility** of utilizing telemedicine in autism assessment, intervention and consultation<sup>4</sup>
- Several states have begun to approve the use of telehealth for ASD

## Settings



## Telehealth and ASD in Wisconsin

- A critical barrier that remains in Wisconsin is **the lack of insurance coverage** for services to be provided via telehealth
- Wisconsin has **no bill ensuring parity**
  - There is no bill stating that providers will receive equal reimbursement for the same service provided via telehealth versus face-to-face

A Promising Step occurred in June 2018 when the Treatment Intervention Advisory Committee (TIAC) of Wisconsin determined that telehealth for behavioral intervention for ASD is a Level 2 treatment on an efficacy scale of Level 1 (Well Established) to Level 5 (Untested/Experimental Treatment and/or Potentially Harmful).

- While this is an initial step, it remains that autism intervention and treatment are not currently covered services in Wisconsin when provided via telehealth

## Increasing Access to Timely Autism Assessment

Project ECHO is a learning and guided practice model in which expert teams provide training and consultation to community providers on a specialty care service through videoconferencing.

The News Bureau of the University of Missouri recently shared a story (link below) regarding how Project ECHO has directly impacted the life of a Missouri family. The article shares how a family had to travel *nearly 100 miles* and wait *18 months* after initially having concerns about potential ASD to receive a diagnosis for their son. When the family had similar concerns regarding their younger child, they were able to obtain a diagnostic assessment in *less than one month* because of Project ECHO at the University of Missouri (program called ECHO Autism).

<https://munews.missouri.edu/news-releases/2018/0815-mizzou-program-significantly-reduces-delay-in-autism-diagnosis/>

## Conclusion

- Telehealth is proposed as a way of helping individuals with ASD access assessment and intervention services, as well as providing a method for experts in ASD to provide consultation to community-based providers to build capacity in local communities
- A recent review of the research on telehealth in ASD<sup>4</sup> found the use of telehealth to be a promising method of service delivery
- Across studies, users have consistently reported high levels of acceptability with ASD services being delivered via telehealth
- While some states have approved the use of telehealth for service delivery in ASD, Wisconsin insurance specifically does not currently cover ASD diagnostic assessment or ASD intervention provided through telehealth

## Next Steps

- Further research is needed to continue to establish the effectiveness of telehealth for ASD, particularly in the area of diagnostic assessments
- A crucial next step will be to pursue insurance coverage for ASD services through telehealth, as well as parity of the services provided
- Continue to explore the use of telehealth for consultation to build capacity with community providers in rural areas of Wisconsin
- Additional efforts need to be undertaken (e.g. increasing the workforce through training) to address other barriers, such as long wait lists for care at specialty clinics

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