

Online Learning for Children and Youth with Brain-based Disabilities: A Rapid Overview of Reviews

Summary

In the midst of the pandemic, a vast majority of children were sent home and remote learning was used as a public health prevention measure. While challenges of online learning for children with disabilities were already present, they may have been exacerbated during the pandemic. In a fast and unexpected way, the education of many children was put in the hands of teachers and parents with little to no resources and guidance.

Implications

School districts across Canada are implementing strategies for online learning independently, without access to evidence-based guidelines. Thus, there is a need for the development and use of standards and guidelines for online learning in order to preserve the equality and access of learning in Canada for all children.

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What is the current situation?

- The shift to online learning imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic brought challenges for children and youth with brain-based disabilities who may have difficulties engaging with online activities.
- It is critical to highlight these challenges so that policies and procedures can be put in place to adequately meet the needs of these children and their families.

What is the objective?

- What are the impact, best practices, gaps, and challenges of online learning for children and youth with brain-based disabilities?

How was the review conducted?

- We conducted a rapid overview of reviews.
- Search strategies were iteratively developed and tested by an experienced medical information specialist in consultation with the review team.
- We performed searches on July 2021 in seven bibliographic databases.
- We included systematic reviews, guidelines and policy scans regarding online learning intervention for school-aged children and youth (5-18 years old) with brain-based disabilities.
- We performed grey literature searches to identify Canadian online learning programs and guidelines in August 2021.

What did the review find?

- The evidence for the impact and advantages of online learning is scarce and the overall quality of included reviews is low.
- Several challenges of online learning were identified, such as the burden put on parents and teachers, and that most programs are competency-based and may not be suited for children with disabilities.
- A number of best practices have been proposed such as following existing policies and regulations to ensure equitable access to online education, providing evidence-based educational content, following the principles of Universal Design for Learning, developing supports and training for parents and teachers, and using a classification system and accreditation program for online learning. On the student level, many best practices were proposed, such as the use of adaptive and assistive technology, and providing structured and personalized learning to meet student's specific needs.
- We found no Canadian guidelines or shared standards for online learning for students with disabilities. There is a lack of continuity for online education models used in Canada, which may pose the risk of unequal learning experiences for these children.