

The Role of Occupational Therapy With Children and Youth

Occupational therapy practitioners work with children, youth, and their families to promote active participation in activities or occupations that are meaningful to them. *Occupation* refers to activities that may support the health, well-being, and development of an individual (AOTA, 2008). For children and youth, occupations are activities that enable them to learn and develop life skills (e.g., school activities), be creative and/or derive enjoyment (e.g., play), and thrive (e.g., self-care and care for others) as both a means and an end. Occupational therapy practitioners work with children of all ages (birth through young adulthood) and abilities. Recommended interventions are based on a thorough understanding of typical development and the impact of disability, illness, and impairment on the individual child's development, play, learning, and overall occupational performance.



Occupational therapy practitioners provide services by collaborating with other professionals to identify and meet needs of children experiencing delays or challenges in development; identifying and modifying or overcoming barriers that interfere with, restrict, or inhibit a child's functional performance; teaching and modeling skills and strategies to children and their families to extend therapeutic intervention; and adapting activities, materials, and environmental conditions so children can participate under different conditions and in various environments.

Developmental Needs

The primary occupations of young children are play and interacting with caregivers. Occupational therapists evaluate children's development and provide intervention to improve skills and/or modify environments when concerns arise about a child's functional performance. Some examples are:

- facilitating movement to help a child sit independently or crawl;
- helping a child learn to follow 2- or 3-step instructions;
- helping a child develop the ability to dress independently;
- helping a child learn to cope with disappointment or failure;
- reducing extraneous environmental noise for a child who is easily distracted;
- building skills for sharing, taking turns, and playing with peers; and
- helping a child develop the ability to use toys and materials in both traditional and creative manners.

Educational Needs

Occupational therapy practitioners work with students in preschool, and elementary, middle, and high school to support successful learning, appropriate behavior, and participation in daily school routines and activities. Services can be provided under the federal Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act, or the Americans with Disabilities Act for students with disabilities, or as part of a multi-tiered problem-solving process for general education students (e.g., Response to Intervention, early intervening services). Practitioners also collaborate with teachers, parents, and education personnel on ways to support student learning throughout the school environment.

Injury-Related Needs

When a child experiences a serious illness or injury, medically based or rehabilitative occupational therapy services may be provided. These services are developmentally appropriate and may emphasize physical skills to increase movement, strength, and/or coordination; and adaptive skills, cognitive abilities, sensorimotor skills, visual motor and perceptual skills, and social and interpersonal skills to improve the child's functional abilities and independence. Outpatient services may be provided to continue rehabilitation progress.

Emotional-Behavioral Needs

Occupational therapy practitioners have training in mental health and are well-suited to address children's emotional and behavioral needs as they relate to everyday activities and social interaction. For example, occupational therapy practitioners help children develop the ability to cope with challenges, calm down when frustrated, defuse anger, and manage impulses in order to succeed at individual tasks and collaborative interactions at home, at school, and in the community.

As children grow older, skills for success in independent living become essential. Occupational therapy practitioners address self-determination and self-advocacy skills, along with transition from school into adult roles.

Where Do Occupational Therapy Practitioners Provide Services?

Occupational therapy services are available for children in traditional settings such as schools, homes, and medical facilities. However, services may also be provided in natural settings such as community playgrounds, child care facilities, and other places that are relevant to the individual child and family needs. Location is based on the outcomes to be achieved, purpose of the services, resources available to the practitioner, needs of the family, and developmental stage of the child or youth. Intervention is provided one-on-one or in small or large groups.

Conclusion

Active participation of caregivers and families in their children's lives is crucial to helping them achieve their greatest potential. If they are concerned about their child's development, caregivers can consult their educational service district to request an occupational therapy evaluation.

References

American Occupational Therapy Association. (2008). Occupational therapy practice framework: Domain & process (2nd ed.). *American Journal of Occupational Therapy*, 62, 625–683.

Resources

American Occupational Therapy Association. (2009). AOTA's societal statement on autism spectrum disorders. *American Journal of Occupational Therapy*, 63, 843–844.

American Occupational Therapy Association. (2008). AOTA's societal statement on play. *American Journal of Occupational Therapy*, 62, 707–708.

Developed for AOTA by Renee Watling, PhD, OTR/L; Leslie Jackson, MEd, OT, FAOTA; Salvador Bondoc, OTD, OTR/L, BCPR; Asha Asher, MA, OTR/L, MEd; and Tina Champagne, MS, OTR.

Copyright © 2010 American Occupational Therapy Association. All rights reserved. This material may be printed and distributed without prior written consent.

Living Life To Its Fullest™
O C C U P A T I O N A L T H E R A P Y

Occupational therapy enables people of all ages live life to its fullest by helping them to promote health, make lifestyle or environmental changes, and prevent—or live better with—injury, illness, or disability. By looking at the whole picture—a client's psychological, physical, emotional, and social make-up—occupational therapy assists people to achieve their goals, function at the highest possible level, maintain or rebuild their independence, and participate in the everyday activities of life.

