
What is Occupational Therapy?

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Occupational therapy interventions are designed to allow the child build on areas of strength and helps them to improve skills in areas of their weakness. Occupational therapy interventions are child-centered and often a session with an Occupational Therapist looks like a fascinating and elaborate play scheme. Occupational therapy uses a holistic approach in planning programmes. This therapy focuses on the physical, social, emotional, sensory and cognitive abilities and needs of the child. In the case of autism, Occupational Therapy works to develop skills for handwriting, fine motor skills and daily living skills. However, the most important part is also to assess and target the child's sensory processing disorders. It is important to remove barriers to learning and help the child become calmer and more focused.

Role of Occupational Therapist

An Occupational Therapist is to promote, maintain, and develop the skills needed by students to be functional in the environment that they are in (home/school) and also in their day to day activities.

Active participation in life promotes:

- learning
- self-esteem
- self-confidence
- independence
- social interaction.

The Occupational Therapist (OT) helps children play, develop self-help skills and participate in their school activities as actively as possible. The occupations or "jobs" of children can be broken down into three areas: play, self-care, and learning/school. The Occupational Therapist will first assess the child to determine his or her developmental level and to determine whether or how the child's issues are getting in the way of "learning" the jobs of childhood. How does Occupational Therapy improve quality of life? Occupational Therapy provides aid to children facing difficulties in their daily activities like brushing, dressing, toileting, writing, drawing, etc. The therapy helps develop these self-help skills in them. For children with Autism Spectrum Disorder, the Occupational Therapist can help gain these skills by observing the child's

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behaviour and developing an intervention for them. The OT uses different sets of methods and plans and there is no such single ideal program as each child is different. These may include activities to help with interaction, puzzles to develop coordination and awareness and more.

The following is a list of some common intervention areas:

- Fine Motor Skills Development of small muscles needed for fingers to pick up small items. For example, picking up colourful beads from bowl using fingers.
- Visual Motor Integration Hand eye coordination, such as picking up small pieces of food from the plate and getting it to the mouth.
- Gross Motor Coordination Walking, standing, running, jumping
- Cognition and perception Thinking and problem solving. For example, trying to figure out how to get a book off a shelf
- Sensory Processing Integration of information coming in from the different senses, such as adjusting your walk from the boardwalk to the sand and into the water on a summer day at the beach)
- Environmental modifications/adaptive equipment Changing the environment so a child can “do” the “work” such as sliding a special pencil grip onto the pencil so it can be held securely for writing.

Occupational Therapy Activities for Children

There are a variety of activities that can be conducted for children depending on the condition. The therapy can be conducted in several places like home, schools, clinic, specialized centre, etc. It is designed differently for kids of various age group.

For Toddlers and Infants:

The infants usually face trouble sleeping at night. The common exercises that are included are bath time activities, gentle massages and sand and water therapy.

Sensory Integration Activities

These Sensory Integration activities helps a child response more actively and accurately to the environment. The activities are designed in such a way that it creates a deep pressure on the child. For example, soft corners are created in the room using soft furnishing like a bean bag which provides a wonderful deep pressure for a calming effect.

Coordination Activities

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These activities are designed for the child's legs and arms so that they can coordinate more effectively. These are basically divided into two broad categories: bilateral and hand-eye coordination skills. For hand-eye coordination, you can have your child to hit a ball with a bat, catch a ball, etc. Bilateral activities provide the ability to use both sides of the body in an accurate manner. Activities such as rolling out pastry sheets from a play dough can be effective.

Visual Perception Activities

These activities help the child understand the information send by eyes to the brain. For form constancy and to help them understand shapes put objects on a tray and ask your child to recognize them. You may use books to teach them different fonts and same alphabets of different sizes to enhance their abilities. You can also use jigsaw puzzle to aid development process.

Activities for Fine and Gross Motor Skills

Fine motor skills activities are required for children who have trouble using a hand, fingers, and forearm properly. The basic therapy includes simple exercises of arms, wrist, fingers, etc., so that they can perform regular work like holding a pencil with ease. For gross motor skills, you may help the child with core and shoulder activities. These activities may include swimming or hopscotch.

Research behind Intervention

The NYU Steinhardt's Department of Occupational Therapy has conducted a research in the to examine the effectiveness of occupational therapy interventions for individuals, groups, or society. Occupational therapists apply their knowledge to help individuals with disabilities to engage in activities of daily living as actively as possible and develop self-help skills. The research conducted within the Department has been focused on promoting the quality of occupational therapy and the effectiveness of occupational therapy interventions.

Focus of Research

- Is Handwriting interventions effective to improve the legibility of school aged children?
- Are Cognitive and Performance based measures used effective for the prevention and wellness among older adults in fall prevention?
- How cognitive interventions to promote neuroplasticity and improve verbal memory and attention
- Research on school based interventions for students with Autism Spectrum Disorders

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(ASD) in inclusive classrooms

- Are school based yoga programs on adaptive behaviour in children and adolescents with disabilities efficient
- Exploration of strength based practices to improve outcomes for children, adolescents and adults with Autism Spectrum Disorder
- Reliability and validity of assessment tools used by occupational therapists
- Validity of computerized visual perceptual motor measures for school aged children
- Outcome measure for children's occupational repertoire development

Who conducted the Research?

- Yu-Lun Chen is a PhD student in the Department of Occupational Therapy at NYU. She has clinical experience which includes home-based intervention for children and families with neurological and developmental disorders. Yu-Lun's research focuses on participation of children and adolescents with disabilities in schools, home activities and in their communities. Her main objectives are to identify the determinants of participation outcomes and to improve current services and interventions.
- Ellen Modlin is a Ph.D. student in the Department of Occupational Therapy at NYU. She has worked in the NYC public schools, Early Intervention, and the Nassau County school district. She is currently serving on the school district's assistive tech committee for the development of screenings and interventions with technology to support students in the classroom. Ellen's focus of interest is using assistive tech to assist students with visual-perceptual deficits.

Conclusion

Based on the focus area of the research, the Department's research agenda is concerned with finding out the links between occupational therapy education and practice and the effects of occupational therapy in the real world of practice. Ultimately, the research activities of Department faculty and students goal is to improve the quality of occupational therapy practice and research. Evaluation of research Strengths of research conducted:

- Researches that was involved in the research are experienced (Based on their work experience in the field)
 - Research does not only focus on young children but it also focuses on adolescents and adults (not age biased as it has a wide age range)
 - Research was conducted in various settings such as classrooms, homes and communities
 - It focuses how Occupational Therapist can serve better to help people with disorders
- Areas of improvement:

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- Duration of the research - It should be done over a longer period of time
 - Although it focuses on how to improve Occupational Therapist, it would be better if they focus more on how the OTs can help the people with disorders function better in their everyday lives
 - Getting parents, guardians or family members of people with disorders to be part of this research Future Directions for Occupational TherapyIt is important for everyone (parents, teachers, therapist, healthcare personnel etc) to begin focusing on the long-term health and education needs for people of all ages and how Occupational Therapy can benefit people with disabilities achieve these needs. On a greater scale, more and more people are accepting the view that disability results from the daily interaction between the individual and his environment, rather than coming from within the person himself. This perspective stresses how the ability to carry out activities and participate in life situations is an essential component of a person's daily living. Participation is described as involvement in a person's daily life and represents the highest level in the hierarchy of functioning. Participation is the ultimate long-term objective of occupational therapy and more focus should be placed on it. More research should be conducted on how to help people with these disabilities to integrate themselves into society. The individualized treatment approach implemented by occupational therapists enables people with disabilities to meet the demands of their occupations, promotes well-being, prevents disability and helps people of all ages maintain optimum health.

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