

Occupational Therapy for Young Children

Birth Through 5 Years of Age



Occupational therapists and occupational therapy assistants support and promote the development and engagement of infants, toddlers, and preschoolers, and their families or other caregivers, in everyday routines. These routines include play, rest and sleep, activities of daily living, education, and social participation. Occupational therapy practitioners, as part of the multidisciplinary team, provide services to young children and their families in a variety of settings, including hospitals, early intervention programs, private clinics, child care, Head Start and Early Head Start programs, preschool and pre-kindergarten programs, and at home.



Occupational therapy is concerned with a child's ability to participate in daily life activities or "occupations." Occupational therapists and occupational therapy assistants use their unique expertise to help children with and without social-emotional, physical, cognitive, communication, and adaptive behavior challenges prepare for and perform important learning and developmental activities. Through an understanding of the impact of disability, illness, and impairment on a child's development, play, ability to learn new skills, and overall occupational performance, occupational therapists design interventions that promote

healthy development, establish needed skills, and modify environments to prevent further disability, all in support of participation in daily activities.

Occupational therapy practitioners also play a key role in educating parents, caregivers, and program staff about disability and the development of children with diverse health and learning needs.

Occupational therapy practitioners bring specific knowledge and expertise to the team to appropriately address children's needs **and collaborate with parents and other members of the team to**

- provide strategies to facilitate full participation of all children in daily routines;
- assess children's developmental and learning needs;
- plan and implement relevant intervention strategies and developmentally appropriate activities;
- reduce environmental barriers that limit a child's participation in family, learning, and community-based activities;
- identify needed assistive technology devices and supports; and
- prepare children and their families for transition to preschool, school, and other community-based programs.

Occupational therapy is an important service for young children with a variety of conditions, including premature birth, low-birth weight, congenital anomalies, neurological disorders, sensory processing difficulties, challenging behavior, neuromuscular disease, prenatal drug exposure, and autism. Services address feeding skills, sensory integration, motor development, environmental exploration, play skills, adaptive behavior, and interactions between the child and others (including caregivers and peers). In early intervention, occupational therapy practitioners support the family’s or caregiver’s capacity to care for the child.

In preschool settings, practitioners support the achievement of developmental and learning outcomes for children by facilitating social skills development, motor development, self-regulatory skills, emergent literacy, and the development of adaptive and self-care skills. Occupational therapists are particularly skilled in helping children access curricular activities by contributing to the design and planning of activities, including identifying any needed accommodations or modifications.

Occupational therapists work with other members of the team, including physicians, nurses, speech-language pathologists, psychologists, physical therapists, teachers, and parents to identify the needs of infants and toddlers and their families. They target desired outcomes and determine the services, supports, and modifications or accommodations needed to achieve those outcomes. When occupational therapy expertise is needed to help the child and family meet their desired goals, services should be included in the child’s program.

Occupational therapy services for young children are available through a variety of agencies and programs, including hospitals, pediatric outpatient centers, Head Start programs, home health agencies, child care, and early intervention and preschool programs under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). Children may also be eligible for services under other federal laws, such as Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act. A team process is used to determine the need for occupational therapy services under IDEA. Occupational therapy practitioners collaborate with teachers and parents to identify the child’s goals and determine the services, supports, and modifications or accommodations needed to achieve those goals. When the team decides that therapy is needed for the child to meet his or her goals, occupational therapy should be included in the child’s programming.

Medically based services may also be needed and are generally supported through public and private insurance. In this instance, a medical condition or diagnosis that indicates medical necessity for occupational therapy services may be required for reimbursement.

Resources

American Occupational Therapy Association. (2009). FAQ: *What is the role of occupational therapy in early intervention?* Available at <http://www.aota.org/Practitioners/PracticeAreas/Pediatrics/Browse/EI/EI-FAQ.aspx>.

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

Jackson, L. (Ed.). (2007). *Occupational therapy services for children and youth under IDEA* (3rd ed.). Bethesda, MD: AOTA Press.

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.