Occupational therapy with school-aged children

Heidi Cramm, Nancy Pollock, Donna Dennis, Kala Subramaniam, and Margo Carkner

In May 2008, the Ontario Society of Occupational Therapists sponsored a think-tank to discuss occupational therapy in the schools. One of the issues identified was the need for a document that clearly outlines the role of occupational therapy with school-aged children and youth that could be used for a variety of purposes and audiences. A task group formed and the following document was prepared by the group. Consultation with therapists from multiple sites and areas of practice was invaluable in this process. Please feel free to copy and distribute this document without limit. An online version of this handout is available in the OT Now section of www.caot.ca

References


Translation Overview.

For more information on this topic, please visit the following websites:

- www.caot.ca
- www.otnow.com

About the authors –

Heidi Cramm, MA, MSc (OT-Post-Professional), OT Reg (Ont.) is a Doctoral Candidate in the School of Rehabilitation Science at Queen’s University in Kingston, Ontario, and may be reached at: heidi.cramm@queensu.ca

Nancy Pollock, MSc, OT Reg (Ont.) is Associate Clinical Professor in the School of Rehabilitation Science at McMaster University in Hamilton, Ontario, and may be reached at: pollock@mcmaster.ca

Donna Dennis, BScOT, MA in Human Development, is on the Faculty for Occupational Therapy at the University of Western Ontario in London, Ontario and may be reached at: ddennis2@uwo.ca

Kala Subramaniam, BScOT, MSc, OT Reg (Ont) is Paediatric Clinical Lead/Occupational Therapist for the Central East team VHA Rehab Solutions, a division of VHA Home HealthCare (formerly COTA Health Rehabilitation Services) in Toronto, Ontario, and may be reached at: kala_s@otahealth.ca

Margo Carkner, BSc OT, OT Reg (Ont) is the Occupational Therapy Professional Practice Leader at the Five Counties Children’s Centre in Peterborough, Ontario. She can be reached at: mcarkner@fivecounties.on.ca
Learning to do new things—taking care of yourself, doing school work, making friends, playing sports or taking up a hobby—is a critical part of daily life for school-aged children. When that ‘doing’ becomes difficult, it interferes with children’s ability to participate in the things they need to do, want to do, or are expected to do. When children have a lot of difficulty doing typical tasks or reaching common benchmarks of childhood like riding a bike, dressing themselves, or having friends, they may benefit from working with an occupational therapist.

Occupational therapists (OTs) work with children, parents or caregivers, schools, and community organizations to enable children to participate fully at school, home, or in the community. Occupational therapists analyze the children’s abilities, activity requirements—what occupational therapists call “occupations”—and environments in which they do those occupations, including classrooms, playgrounds, homes, and communities. Occupational therapists intervene by determining how to increase the fit between the person, the occupation, and the environment. When there is a good fit among these areas, children are successful in their participation and progress in their development. In turn, this leads to positive health and well-being in childhood and adolescence and provides a solid foundation for becoming productive and engaged adults.

Who Can Benefit?
Children of all ages, all grade levels, and all areas of difficulty may derive benefit from involvement with occupational therapy. Children do not necessarily need a formal diagnosis or school identification, but may be experiencing ongoing difficulties in accessing the curriculum, in school participation, in self-care, in social or physical play, or in functioning in the community. For example, children who have:

- Physical difficulties, such as sensory or motor development disorders, that interfere with their ability to learn complex motor tasks or that affect their self-care, social interaction, or mobility.
- Cognitive difficulties that impact on their learning and development of literacy and numeracy, as well as their ability to organize themselves, their belongings, their time, and their thoughts.
- Social or cultural difficulties that impact on social participation, peer relationships, following routines and the ability to transition between environments or occupations.
- Emotional difficulties that affect how children regulate their emotions and behaviour.

How Can Occupational Therapy Help?

Occupational therapists work directly with children and their families as well as with schools and community partners to restore and improve ability, prevent further disability, progress children towards targeted outcomes, develop routines, support transitions, promote integration, and build the capacity of families, schools, and communities to support the child.

What Can Occupational Therapists Do with School-aged Children?

Self Care:
- Help children develop skills expected for their age such as independent dressing, eating, hygiene and mobility
- Prescribe equipment such as wheelchairs, bath seats, and grab bars
- Educate families and work with children to develop routines for hygiene, morning, and bedtime
- Support families in identifying and accessing community resources

Productivity:
- Educate parents and school staff about the sensory, motor, perceptual, social, and behavioural characteristics of a specific child and the demands of the activities at school and home
- Provide in-service instruction to enhance teacher and educational assistant capacity
- Determine how environments might be changed to accommodate for a student's needs
- Work directly with children and youth to increase function at school, life skills and work readiness
- Aid in the development of the Individualized Education Plan (IEP)
- Recommend accommodations that include adapting existing materials and tools, including desks, seating, agendas, worksheets, writing implements, and storage of personal belongings
- Introduce and prescribe assistive technologies such as specialized software applications
- Work with students, families, and teachers to develop transition plans into new schools and post-secondary programs

Leisure:
- Consult with community recreational facilities to develop inclusive programs
- Help children develop skills expected for their age to participate in gym, play, and recreation programs
- Support families and schools to provide inclusive play and social opportunities

When children and teens have difficulty doing, occupational therapy can analyze their abilities, the demands of the occupation, and the environments where those occupations take place. Contact an occupational therapist if you have concerns about a child or teen’s ability to do the things he or she needs to do, wants to do, or is expected to do.

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