Occupational therapy’s distinct value is to improve health and quality of life through facilitating participation and engagement in occupations, the meaningful, necessary, and familiar activities of everyday life. Occupational therapy is client-centered, achieves positive outcomes, and is cost-effective.

Occupational therapy distinctly focuses on participation by:

- Using a holistic approach to consider all components of the individual and his or her goals
- Focusing on inclusion by supporting engagement in activities in their natural contexts
- Increasing an individual’s capacity and/or modifying environments and activities for greater participation (Person-Environment-Occupation fit)
- Providing expertise in both mental and physical health
- Offering a lifespan approach
- Providing evidence-based and cost-effective services

Research Supports the Importance of Active Engagement

- Life skills development has been found to be a good prognostic indicator for future employment of individuals with autism (Klinger, Klinger, Mussey, Thomas, & Powell, 2015).
- Student engagement in school activities such as recess has been correlated to positive behavior and greater attention (Barros, Silver, & Stein, 2009; Holmes, Pellegrini, & Schmidt, 2006).
- Some research indicates that individuals with disabilities who used activity modification strategies report positive quality of life and health (Lindberg & Iwarsson, 2002).
- “When working in interprofessional collaboration, speech-language pathologists and occupational therapists agree that occupational therapy is indispensable to early intervention in enabling communication in ASD” (Hebert, Kehayia, Prelock, Wood-Dauphinee, & Snider, 2014, p. 594).

Occupational Therapy Enables Participation in Daily Routines

- Children and their families experience a greater sense of satisfaction, and their health and wellness outcomes increase, when they are able to participate successfully and independently in daily and meaningful routines and tasks at home, at school, and in community environments (Fingerhut, 2013).
- Children with disabilities are vulnerable to participation restrictions in their physical and social environments (Harding et al., 2009).
- For children and youth with disabilities, health, wellness, and a sense of belonging in social communities can be enhanced and promoted by successful participation in roles, routines, and occupations of meaning and value (Dunst & Dempsey, 2007).
- Occupational therapists promote health and wellness and establish healthy habits and routines that lead to active participation across the life span by:
  - Adapting activities and environments to enhance participation in meaningful roles and routines (American Occupational Therapy Association, 2014; Doll, 2014)
  - Enhancing development and skill acquisition in motor coordination, social interaction, problem solving, and self-advocacy (Case-Smith, 2013; Cohn & Lew, 2010; Doll, 2014)
  - Facilitating independence across the spectrum of occupational routines in feeding, bathing, dressing, and other self-care activities (Cohn & Lew, 2010)
Occupational Therapy Supports Everyday Skills

Self-Care
Taking care of personal needs such as dressing, hygiene, eating, and sleep are essential skills for children to develop independence and autonomy. For children with special needs, mastering these skills is especially important. Occupational therapists may:
- Make suggestions to modify the environment or routines to facilitate sleep (Fung, Wiseman-Hakes, Stergiou-Kita, Nguyen, & Colantonio, 2013; Jan et al., 2008)
- Use play to address visual-motor or fine motor goals (Case-Smith, 2000)
- Focus on strategies to increase independence in skills such as dressing, toileting, brushing teeth, or bathing
- Use play and cognitive strategies to motivate a child to practice challenging skills, such as eating (Benson, Parke, Gannon, & Muñoz, 2013)

Play and Leisure Skills
Play is a child’s primary occupation; it is the foundation of exploration, creativity, and mastery of one’s environment and its tools (Grove & Davis, 2010). Through play, children are provided a strong bedrock for cognitive, physical, social, and emotional development (Brazelton & Cramer, 1990; Bruner, 1972; Greenspan & Lewis, 1999). Play enriches healthy brain growth, fosters creativity, and supports a child’s learning and development (Barnett, 1990; Widerstrom, 2005). Active engagement between peers and family members toward a shared purpose and goal through sharing, resolution, and cooperation occurs during play (Cook, Tessier, & Klein, 2000). Play is the ultimate learning tool for children, and occupational therapy practitioners utilize play often when providing interventions and services for children and youth.
- All children learn through daily life activities such as play and leisure skills. Occupational therapy practitioners provide services to children and youth in order to:
  - Enhance play and leisure skills by assisting children to adapt to the environment, negotiate barriers, and find supports in friends, pets, and neighbors (Harding et al., 2009)
  - Connect children’s interests and abilities to create positive experiences in play and leisure (Frolek Clark & Kingsley, 2013; Harding et al., 2009)
  - Improve social interactions, and physical, cognitive, communication, and sensory processing skills (Frolek Clark & Kingsley, 2013; Harding et al., 2009)

Social Participation
- Children and families that socialize together have a stronger emotional bond and demonstrate higher levels of family engagement and communication (Cooksey & Fondell, 1996; Zabriski & McCormick, 2001).
- Research suggests that family socialization has a positive impact on school performance and success (Weiss, Lopez, & Stark, 2011). With strong social bonds in place among families and peer groups early on, evidence suggests that there are fewer behavioral problems in the teenage years (Pearce et al., 2003).
- Occupational therapists are health care providers who are trained in mental health evaluation and intervention. They work with children and youth of all ages in the home, school, and community to facilitate self-regulation, develop social communication skills, and enhance participation in meaningful occupations with family members and friends. Occupational therapy practitioners improve social participation, interaction, and well-being. They provide services to children and youth so they can participate in daily life activities (occupations) including:
  - Promoting mental health through bullying prevention programs, stress management, programs to increase social and physical skills, and parent education to improve child compliance (Bazyk & Arbesman, 2013)
  - Promoting social behavior, social confidence, and self-regulation (Bazyk & Arbesman, 2013)
Using cognitive-behavior therapy, in conjunction with other approaches, for children with autism spectrum disorder to reduce parent-reported anxiety (Bazyk & Arbesman, 2013)
Engaging students in play, recreation, and leisure occupations (Bazyk & Arbesman, 2013)
Analyzing and teaching skill components to understand social cues and respond to social contexts in flexible and adaptive ways (Barnes, Vogel, Beck, Schoenfeld, & Owen, 2008; Lamb-Parker, LeBuffe, Powell, & Halpern, 2008; Stoffel & Tomlinsn, 2011)
Facilitating community-wide social-emotional learning opportunities (positive relationships, behavior management, mental health literacy) (Elbaum & Vaughn, 2001; Pizur-Barnekow, Doering, Cashin, Patrick, & Rhyner, 2010; Steed, Noh, & Heo, 2014).

Work and Volunteer Service
• Youth who obtain paid or unpaid jobs before graduation are more successful in obtaining and maintaining paid work in the community as adults (Bruder, 2010).
• Employment preparation is critical for transitioning from school to work, including daily living and community living skills, socialization skills, self-determination, and self-advocacy skills (Bruder, 2010).
• Occupational therapy practitioners work with youth to prepare them for work (employed or volunteer) and independent lives.
  > Occupational therapists may provide job coach services, task and environmental adaptations, safe transportation alternatives, and assistive technology.
  > Occupational therapists work with the youth and the team to evaluate all aspects of paid and unpaid employment and to match the youth with the environments and activities that best support his or her interest and preferences.

Occupational Therapy Practitioners Work in Many Settings
Occupational therapy practitioners support children of all ages and their families in many contexts, including:

• Homes
• Daycares
• Communities
• Schools
• Clinics
• Hospitals

Early Childhood Services (0–5 years). Occupational therapists work with parents and other caregivers to enhance early development through early intervention and preschool services. These services may include:
• Provide family-centered service delivery that incorporates support to strengthen the family to improve satisfaction, well-being, social support, child performance (e.g., cognitive, motor, self-care), and parenting skills (Frolek Clark & Kingsley, 2013).
• Use interventions such as modeling, play-based activities, cognitive-behavioral strategies, and social toys to promote cooperative play and positive social outcomes (Frolek Clark & Kingsley, 2013).

Learning and School Environments (3–21 years). Schools, including preschools, are for learning academic, nonacademic, and functional skills. Occupational therapists enhance participation in daily life activities in school for children with disabilities or at risk for disabilities, including:
• Assist the child to benefit from his or her educational program (Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004 [IDEA]) by focusing on activities of daily living (e.g., dressing, hygiene, eating, rest and sleep), instrumental activities of daily living (e.g., community mobility, safety), learning (e.g., handwriting, computer use, attention), play and leisure, social participation, and work (Frolek Clark & Chandler, 2014)
• Provide services in the least restrictive environment and assist in transition planning to prepare children for further education, employment, and independent lives (IDEA; Landmark, Ju, & Zhang, 2010)
• Work with the student as well as family, educational staff, and community members to promote educational, physical, and social aspects of participation for the student

“School OTs are invaluable team members. They help the children with handwriting. They also help children with anxiety and focus, by finding the right kind of sensory input, or adjusting their seating or tables.”
—Educator

“Our daughter, Katie, has shown continued growth and progress through the efforts of her OT. Our therapist has had consistent forethought in making sure she will have the skills needed to work and live independently. Whether it is mundane tasks such as being able to open packages and utilize a can opener in the kitchen, or more office-centered skills such as using a three-hole punch and collating papers, Shannon has been there every step of the way. We couldn’t do it without her!”
—Parent
• Enhance access to the school environment through modifications and supports (e.g., ability to open locker, play on playground) and access to school meals with modifications or substitutions of appropriate foods (Frolek Clark & Chandler, 2014; IDEA)
• Promote evidence-based initiatives such as Early Intervening Services (multi-tiered system of services), Universal Design for Learning, and School Health and Wellness (e.g., backpack safety, nutritional foods, activity to increase health and decrease obesity, stop school bullying) (Frolek Clark & Chandler, 2014)

References


