



September 9, 2008

Interagency Autism Coordinating Committee

Re: Request for Information: Comment on Draft IACC Strategic Plan for ASD Research

The American Occupational Therapy Association (AOTA) represents the interest of more than 100,000 occupational therapists, occupational therapy assistants and students of occupational therapy. We appreciate the opportunity to provide information to the Interagency Autism Coordinating Committee (IACC) regarding the draft strategic plan for research about Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD).

AOTA is pleased that occupational therapy is acknowledged as an intervention that is appropriate for children and adults with ASD, and we would like to comment on **Section IV of the Strategic Plan, “Which Treatments and Interventions Will Help?”**

The strategic plan states that occupational therapy addresses problems with sensory integration and motor planning (p.17). While this is true, we would like to clarify that occupational therapy strives to improve functioning in everyday activities. While many individuals with ASD have sensory processing disorders or sensory integration problems, **occupational therapists would address these sensory issues if it was negatively influencing an individual’s ability to perform daily activities** such as eating, bathing, dressing, learning, and participating in family and community activities. This clarification is in keeping with the focus of the profession and the way occupational therapy is dedicated to the improvement of function and performance so that individuals can lead more productive, satisfying lives.

A systematic review of occupational therapy related interventions used for autism revealed that many interventions used by occupational therapists are effective for promoting social interactions, academic performance, self-care, play, and participation in society (Case-Smith & Arbesman, 2008). One of the key findings from this review is the importance of developing **individualized interventions** through analysis of performance and behavior so that interventions are appropriate for the individual’s developmental level and addresses the underlying variables influencing performance. Occupational therapists are skilled at analyzing performance, considering environmental modifications, and customizing interventions to developmental age, parents’ goals, and context. However, customizing interventions for each individual and family makes designing large-scale studies difficult. We respectfully request that research opportunities (p. 19) include **observational study** designs because randomized controlled trials are not always feasible for sustained customized therapies such as occupational therapy.

One of the research opportunities refers to “interventions that improve functioning and quality of life for older children and adults with ASD.” AOTA is pleased that the IACC is addressing the needs of older children and adults with ASD, but we seek clarification on the term “**functioning**”. Occupational therapists frequently use function to refer to

performing tasks, but other disciplines use function to refer to specific capacities. If the intent is to focus on the function in daily life activities, AOTA would support this broader view of function. Indeed, the systematic review discovered that there are very few studies of adolescents' and young adults' performance in work and independent living settings. Families desire to know how individuals with ASD can work and live in the community as independently as possible.

Another research opportunity to consider is studying interventions that enable children with ASD to learn and perform academic tasks, as well as their ability to transition to another educational setting. School is a context in which many children with ASD face challenges. Occupational therapists utilize the strengths of children with ASD, such as visual perception, to address areas of concern, such as maladaptive behavior, which may be related to sensory modulation problems. We would like to see more studies that **measure physiological and performance effects to determine the causal mechanisms through which sensory-based interventions influence behavioral and performance outcomes.**

In summary, AOTA lauds the IACC's work in developing this strategic plan and would like to recommend:

- Clarifying occupational therapy's role in treating individuals with ASD; occupational therapists enable individuals' ability to perform daily activities and participate in society to their fullest.
- Including observational studies to examine the effectiveness of therapies.
- Clarifying the term "functioning" for older children and adults with ASD; we need research on adolescents' and young adults' performance in work and independent living settings.
- Considering studies that measure both physiological and performance effects to determine the mechanisms through which sensory-based interventions influence behavioral and performance outcomes.

Again, we thank you for this opportunity to share our thoughts related to the IACC's Strategic Plan for ASD Research and look forward to continuing to work with the committee and member organizations in support of our common research agenda.

Susan H. Lin

Susan H. Lin, ScD, OTR/L
Director of Research
The American Occupational Therapy Association