

Home Modifications and Occupational Therapy

Optimizing the fit between individuals and their environments

helps them use their functional abilities to participate in daily life activities. Occupational therapy plays a key role in identifying strategies that enable individuals to modify their homes to meet this need.

What Are Home Modifications?

Home modifications are “adaptations to living environments intended to increase usage, safety, security, and independence for the user. Home modifications are used in conjunction with assistive devices and home repairs” (American Occupational Therapy Association [AOTA], 2005, p. 28). As part of the home modification process, services include assessing needs, identifying solutions, implementing solutions, training in the use of solutions, and evaluating outcomes that contribute to the home modification product (AOTA, 2005; as adapted from Sanford, 2004). The results of this process may be recommendations for alterations, adjustments, or additions to the home environment, through the use of specialized, customized, off-the-shelf, or universally designed technologies, equipment, products, hardware controls and cues, finishes, furnishings, and other features that affect the layout and structure of the home (Sanford, 2004).

The Role of Occupational Therapy in Home Modifications

Occupational therapy practitioners are experts at identifying the cause of difficulties in performance of activities of daily living (ADL) and instrumental activities of daily living (IADL).

Occupational therapy practitioners evaluate the client, their environment, and their occupational performance in that environment, as well as make recommendations for products to improve the fit between the client, place, and activity. Occupational therapists can evaluate both the skills of the client and the environmental features that support or limit the performance of meaningful or necessary activities, thereby enhancing health, safety, and well-being. Based on this assessment, they recommend modification and intervention strategies that improve the fit between the person and his or her environment.

As the population of older adults continues to grow dramatically, home modifications are a key factor in enabling individuals to “age in place.” Aging in place refers to the ability to remain in the home



Lowering the height of a wall oven can make a kitchen more functional for a person who uses a wheelchair.

(Photo courtesy of Easter Seals and Century 21 Real Estate LLC's Easy Access Housing program.)

even if the client's abilities have declined. An AARP study found that more than 80% of people older than age 50 want to age in their own homes as they grow older (Bayer & Harper, 2000). Others who can benefit from home modifications include clients of all ages with health conditions, sensory or movement impairments, or cognitive disorders that have an impact on their occupational performance, safety, and well-being. Home modifications may also provide the opportunity for someone to move from a more institutional setting



Many types of products and adaptations are available to increase function and safety in the bathroom.

(e.g., a skilled nursing facility) to the community, if he or she desires.

Home modifications recommended by an occupational therapy practitioner can reduce the challenges posed by the environment, thereby supporting an individual's capabilities. One example is installing a chair lift if the client cannot climb the stairs to the second floor of the home. Another example is adding railings and grab bars to bathroom or other walls to provide support during functional mobility and self-care activities. Occupational therapy practitioners can provide unique and valuable services in home modifications, both directly and indirectly to promote safety and function, so that individuals can participate in their daily occupations and activities of choice.

Occupational therapy services can be provided directly to clients who are experiencing a decline in their level of safety or independence, or are planning for future needs. Occupational



A lowered counter height and pocket doors that slide into the cabinet allow wheelchair access to this sink. (Photo courtesy of Easter Seals and Century 21 Real Estate LLC's Easy Access Housing program.)

therapy services are available in many places in the community: hospitals, home health agencies, clinics, rehabilitation or community agencies, or through private practitioners. Occupational therapy services may be reimbursable under Medicare and some private health insurance plans when coverage criteria are met, including a physician referral.

Occupational therapy practitioners will work individually with clients to plan adaptations to the environment in order to increase their independence, promote health, and prevent further decline or injury. The full spectrum of occupations should be considered, from ADL (bathing, dressing, and other self-care activities) to IADL (including meal preparation, clothing care, and home maintenance) to play and/or leisure (playing cards, reading a book, watching TV, enjoying hobbies).

Occupational therapy practitioners can enhance client well-being and participation (indirectly) by serving as a consultant to contractors, builders, architects, and community programs that provide home modifications. Occupational therapy practitioners understand the functional impact of acute and chronic conditions that affect performance skills including mobility. Occupational therapy practitioners can recommend modifications that enhance clients' ADL and IADL performance, and can promote the incorporation of universal design principles that may reduce the need for future environmental adaptation. ■

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References and Resources

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- For more information**, contact the American Occupational Therapy Association, the professional society of occupational therapy, representing nearly 36,000 occupational therapists, occupational therapy assistants, and students working in practice, science, education, and research.



The American Occupational Therapy Association

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Occupational Therapy: Skills for the Job of Living

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