

Caring for the Caregiver



A child with a disability can cause great physical, emotional, and financial demands on parents, families, and caregivers, and the needs of caregivers can be ignored or forgotten. Caring for a child with a disability can create stress, depression, and physical problems. Some parents and caregivers may have frequent recurrences of depression and sadness when a child with a disability does not achieve the same milestones as other children. Events such as birthdays, graduations, and marriages can trigger sadness.

Some parents may feel they cannot fully participate in other life roles such as husband or wife, son or daughter, student, employee, or volunteer because they are too busy. Others feel guilty spending time away from a child with a disability.

Occupational therapists can help caregivers maintain a lifestyle in which the child's needs are met as well as the rest of the family's.

What can an occupational therapist do?

- **Recognize** that the needs of parents must be met in addition to the needs of a child with a disability.
- **Encourage** parents to express their feelings of stress, anger, frustration, and sadness.
- **Explore** coping strategies and encourage healthy styles such as exercise, group or individual therapy, and other hobbies.
- **Stay informed** of current research on conditions and intervention techniques to share with clients.

What can families do?

- **Join** a therapy or discussion group for parents and families with children with disabilities.
- **Share** the responsibility a child with a disability creates within the family. Ask others for help.
- **Develop** a schedule that distributes caregiving responsibility.

Need more information?

Frequent depression and stress is a serious problem and could cause physical and emotional complications to all family members. If you would like to consult an occupational therapist, your physician, other health professionals, and your school district's director of special education may have information on how you can access an occupational therapist in your area.

Occupational therapists and occupational therapy assistants are trained in helping children and adults

with a broad range of physical, developmental, and behavioral conditions. School therapists treat children with autism, mental retardation, hyperactivity, and emotional disorders; and adults can be treated for physical disabilities, such as the effects of stroke and hand disorders, and mental and cognitive problems.