

Occupational Therapy In School Settings



Occupational therapists and occupational therapy assistants are part of the education team within a school district. The profession of occupational therapy is concerned with a person's ability to participate in desired daily life activities or "occupations." In the schools, occupational therapy practitioners use their unique expertise to help children to prepare for and perform important learning and school-related activities and to fulfill their role as students. In this setting, occupational therapists (and occupational therapy assistants, under the supervision of the occupational therapist) support academic and non-academic outcomes, including social skills, math, reading and writing (i.e., literacy), behavior management, recess, participation in sports, self-help skills, prevocational/vocational participation, and more, for children and students with disabilities, 3 to 21 years of age. Practitioners are particularly skilled in facilitating student access to curricular and extracurricular activities through supports, designing and planning, and other methods. Additionally, they play a critical role in training parents, other staff members, and caregivers regarding educating students with diverse learning needs.

Occupational therapy practitioners have specific knowledge and expertise to appropriately address student needs.

Occupational therapists and occupational therapy assistants know how to

- observe a student engaging in an activity and provide strategies to facilitate the student's full participation;
- reduce barriers that limit student participation within the school environment;
- use assistive technology to support student success;
- support the needs of students with significant challenges, such as by helping to determine methods for alternate assessment;
- help identify long-term goals for appropriate post-school outcomes;
- help plan relevant instructional activities for ongoing implementation in the classroom; and
- assist students in preparing for successful transition into appropriate post-high school employment, independent living, and/or further education.

Occupational therapy practitioners collaborate with the education team to address student needs.

They work with a variety of people such as

- students to improve their performance in a variety of learning environments (e.g., playgrounds, classrooms, lunchrooms, bathrooms) and optimize their performance with adaptations/accommodations;
- parents to help them support their children's learning and participation in school;
- educators and other school support staff to plan and develop activities and environments that include all students;
- paraeducators to support child success and promote safety within the school environment (e.g., physical and behavioral assistance needs); and
- administrators to provide training for students, staff, and parents, as well as to recommend equipment for schools and ways to modify existing buildings and curriculum to allow access for all.

Occupational therapy services for students with special needs are determined through the IEP process.



School-based occupational therapy is available for students who are eligible for special education. Occupational therapists complete assessments and work with other members of the school-based team to help determine what is needed for a student to receive a free appropriate public education in the least restrictive environment. They collaborate with the team to identify a student’s annual goals and determine the services, supports, modifications, and accommodations that are required for the student to achieve these goals, including addressing transition needs as early as 14 but no later than 16 years of age. When

the individualized education program (IEP) team determines that occupational therapy is needed for a student in order to meet his or her annual goals, then occupational therapy should be included in the student’s IEP. In some instances, students whose disability affects their participation in school but who do not qualify under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), may be eligible to receive occupational therapy under other federal laws such as Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act (Section 504) and the Americans with Disabilities Act.

Occupational therapy practitioners help to promote healthy school climates that are conducive to learning.

They offer other valuable services to meet the broader student and systemic needs by addressing students’ mental health needs and participating in other school-wide initiatives such as positive behavior supports, response to intervention (RtI), and Early Intervening activities to address student behavior and learning needs. In addition, occupational therapy practitioners are active participants in developing curriculums and programs, addressing school health and safety, identifying assessment accommodations and modifications required for accountability purposes, and developing violence prevention and other types of programs. In this capacity, occupational therapy practitioners also focus on supporting the needs of all students, including those without disabilities. For example, many schools use the occupational therapist’s knowledge and expertise to assist in curriculum development such as for handwriting and social skills, or to recommend modifications to or design of classroom environments or assignments that help all students access and participate in school (universal design for learning).

Resources

- American Occupational Therapy Association. (2008). Occupational therapy practice framework: Domain and process (2nd ed.). *American Journal of Occupational Therapy*, 62, 625–683.
- Frolek-Clark, G., Polichino, J., & Jackson, L. (2004). Occupational therapy services in early intervention and school-based programs. *American Journal of Occupational Therapy*, 58, 681–685.
- Jackson, L. (Ed.). (2007). Occupational therapy services for children and youth under IDEA (3rd ed.). Bethesda, MD: AOTA Press.

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O C C U P A T I O N A L T H E R A P Y

Occupational therapy enables people of all ages live life to its fullest by helping them to promote health, make lifestyle or environmental changes, and prevent—or live better with—injury, illness or disability. By looking at the whole picture—a client’s psychological, physical, emotional, and social make-up—occupational therapy assists people to achieve their goals, function at the highest possible level, maintain or rebuild their independence and participate in the everyday activities of life.

