Promoting Strengths in Children and Youth

OCCUPATIONAL PERFORMANCE

Practitioners can focus on using the child's strengths and abilities to increase participation in the following areas of occupation:

Social participation
- Sensitivity to others
- Empathy
- Prosocial behaviors such as turn-taking and sharing

ADLs
- Self-confidence and positive identity
- Attention to and independence in self-care

Education
- Academic skills and performance
- Group skills necessary for learning
- Rule compliance
- Class engagement

Work
- Striving behaviors such as leadership and initiation
- Sense of mastery and accomplishment
- Flexibility and adaptive performance
- Persistence and dependability
- Identification of abilities targeted for future college and career

Play/Leisure
- Use of play as a successful coping strategy
- Resilience and social skills

Sleep/Rest
- Balance of daily routines including rest and relaxation
- Promotion of general mental and physical health and happiness

OCCUPATIONAL THERAPY PRACTITIONERS use meaningful activities to help children and youth participate in what they need and or want to do in order to promote physical and mental health and well-being. Occupational therapy practitioners focus on participation in the following areas: education, play and leisure, social participation, activities of daily living (ADLs; e.g., eating, dressing, hygiene), instrumental activities of daily living (e.g., meal preparation, shopping), sleep and rest, and work. These are the usual occupations of childhood. Task analysis is used to identify factors (e.g., sensory, motor, social–emotional, cognitive) that may limit successful participation across various settings, such as school, home, and community. Activities and accommodations are used in intervention to promote successful performance in these settings.

DEFINITION: PROMOTING STRENGTHS DURING EVERYDAY PRACTICE

In strength-based approaches, the practitioner focuses on identifying and building upon the student's abilities versus focusing on their limitations or disabilities (Hoagwood et al., 2007; Reddy, DeThomas, Newman, & Chan, 2009). For example, a student with vocal talent would be encouraged to participate in the school chorus or other opportunities to sing in community programs.

Who benefits from a strength-based approach?

1. **Children in general education without identified problems or risks.** All children can benefit from identifying and fostering their preferences and abilities.
2. **Children in general education who are at risk of school failure due to:**
   - Dyslexia or learning needs
   - Mild to moderate mental health challenges
   - Having bullied or having been bullied
   - Occupational deprivation or socioeconomic needs
3. **Children served in special education with:**
   - Significant learning disabilities, developmental delays, or school failure
   - Severe mental health needs
   - Multiple systems involvement (e.g., mental health, juvenile justice, child welfare)

What traits are promoted?

Recent research (Fette, 2011) suggests that the following student strengths are associated with positive psychosocial and academic outcomes and should be promoted:

- **Contextual Supports**
  - Caring adults: relationships with teachers and others who model positive values and behaviors
  - Positive peer relations: acceptance by positive friends who model prosocial behavior
  - Family bonds: active engagement with good fit, communication, supportive relationships
  - Community participation: sense of belonging and meaning, commitment to roles
  - Cultural factors: importance of differing meanings in and identification with different cultures
  - School foundations: for social, academic, and study skills; peer group with whom to transition
  - School environment: positive classroom with high-quality education environment
  - Respect from others: people show consideration for the individual's needs or preferences
  - Material possessions: building identity or interests
- **Personal Traits**
  - Attention: ability to focus and follow directions; affects quality of effort
  - Cognition: self-knowledge, accurate interpretation or processing, intelligence, grasp of concepts
  - Creativity: original expression, inventiveness, imagination, openness to ideas, aesthetics
  - Interests: skills, fascinations, hobbies, engagement in self-targeted subjects
  - Health: physical and mental health, symptoms well controlled, free of med side effects
  - Temperament: individual qualities, values, and personality
  - Optimism: emotional well-being, joy, enthusiasm, hope, humor, positive mood
  - Positive identity: self-confidence, esteem, respect, happiness with life choices, authentic

continued

This information sheet is part of a School Mental Health Toolkit at www.aota.org/Practice/Children-Youth/Mental%20Health/School-Mental-Health.aspx

Occupational Therapy's Role in Promoting Strengths

Strength-based occupational therapy supports may be applied at the universal, targeted or intensive levels of interventions in the following ways:

Individual or small group intervention: The use of activity and environmental analysis are applied individually and during group interventions to promote the "just-right" challenge and a successful experience that will foster self-confidence. Occupational therapy practitioners can develop interventions that begin with individual children's strengths and use those to craft carefully selected occupation-based activities, thus creating opportunities to practice increased adaptive behaviors in the context of strengths. Occupational therapy can assist with generalization within the school. A fundamental belief is that the student is capable of producing an adaptive response. Practitioners may foster role-shift experiences by observing student roles, identifying activities that are part of successful student routines, and facilitating opportunities to participate. Where access is restricted, practitioners can design meaningful tasks using their strengths that require use of restricted areas (Schultz, 2009).

Whole-school strategies: Occupational therapy practitioners can promote positive behaviors during whole-school initiatives, such as anti-bullying campaigns, cafeteria and playground time, and when consulting with educators and specialists. They may model use of student strengths in evaluation and intervention and give examples of how to use student strengths during staff in-services.

Collaboration with teachers: Practitioners may consult with teachers and other school personnel on how to adapt the school environment so that students can use their strengths during classroom activities. Sometimes this includes explaining behaviors that may be interpreted as oppositional but may have an underlying function, or by suggesting activities that utilize a student's strengths (e.g. artistic or musical talent). A practitioner can support a student by developing a portfolio of his accomplishments to share or coach a student to take a leadership role during his or her individualized education program meetings, thereby promoting self-advocacy skills.

Home: Occupational therapy practitioners build on adaptive responses in play, self-care, and social participation of the individual child and when interacting with family members and caregivers. Promoting participation in family routines, such as mealtime participation and grooming activities, helps to build independence, play skills, and strong family bonds. Sharing a child's positive behaviors will enhance family engagement.

Community: Occupational therapy practitioners may help promote a child's interests and abilities by identifying settings within the school and community that offer opportunities for leisure participation, such as sports teams, drama club, dance studios, martial arts, or after-school activities and groups that are associated with the child's strengths.

Roles for college and career: Practitioners can modify environments and curriculum to decrease barriers and increase participation. The occupational therapy practitioner can support positive transition outcomes by offering assistive technology training and helping the student develop work skills. Practitioners can help to identify and build on existing strengths for future employment or leisure participation.

Strength-based service may include strategies such as:

- Promoting activities in which a child takes a special interest and encouraging further participation and skill development (e.g., art activities, sports)
- Asking the child to make a list of favorite activities
- Interviewing the child and those who know him or her best to identify top abilities
- Asking the child to complete sentences such as "I like to…" or " I am really good at …"
- Verbally acknowledging a child's positive behaviors, unique talents, and accomplishments
- Helping the student to develop a portfolio of work samples
- Sharing a child's strengths with teachers and helping to identify applications in the classroom

CHECK THIS OUT!

- Strength-based practice overview http://www.fyi2.org/Strength-Based.html
- Strengths OPEN Model Overview http://www.fyi2.org/Strengths_for_School.html
- Breaking Ranks in the Middle http://www.nassp.org/portals/0/content/53495.pdf

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