



Occupational Therapy in the School System Position Paper

Occupational therapy is a health profession that is therapeutic-rehabilitative-educational in nature. It derives its sources of knowledge from occupational, medical, and social sciences. The primary role of occupational therapists is to assist people to engage in occupations that are purposeful, significant and important to them in order to enable them to participate in daily life activities as a basis for their health, well being, safety and quality of life. Occupational therapists work with a variety of populations, in different settings. Occupational therapy treatment is tailored to the age, abilities/limitations, roles, values and cultural background of the individual.

One of the main populations that occupational therapists work with is students in the school system. The underlying causes of a student's difficulties may stem from different factors related to the student, such as: sensorimotor, cognitive, emotional and/ or social, as well as from the requirements of the task, environmental limitations or from a mismatch between the student, the task and the environment.

The role of school-based occupational therapists is to identify, assess and treat students who find it difficult to engage in school-related activities, with the purpose of enabling them to participate in the different areas of occupations, including: activities of daily living, education, pre-vocational activities, play, leisure, and social participation. In addition, school-based occupational therapists are involved in the early identification of children at-risk for developmental delays and in promoting the health of the children through guidance and consultation to the children, their families and the staff. School-based occupational therapy intervention is performed in collaboration with the student, his/her family and the educational and therapeutic staff.

Occupational areas of occupational therapists who work in the school system

Independence in daily life; (Activities of Daily Living /ADL, and Instrumental ADL/IADL).

In the area of ADL/I ADL, the role of the occupational therapists is to enable the students to be as independent as possible in their functioning in daily activities. These activities are divided into basic activities such as:toileting dressing, eating, mobility and orientation within the educational setting; and complex instrumental activities such as :home economics, shopping, use of money, use of public transportation and means of communication.

Learning and pre-vocational activities

In these areas the occupational therapists focus on a number of functions:



- **Providing basic tools for learning and developing learning strategies.** The occupational therapists work on various areas such as increasing the attention and concentration span and the ability to cope with, and persist in a task, controlling impulsivity, developing systematic work habits so as to enable the student to organize his/her task performance, adjusting tasks according to the student's cognitive abilities. The purpose of the intervention, beyond increasing students' participation, is to improve their self-efficacy and competency as well as motivation to engage in the daily school activities.
- **Organization and planning in the educational setting.** Occupational therapists assist students who have difficulty in the areas of organization, including organizing and using objects, such as assistive devices and games (e.g., construction games, work materials, notebooks, pencil cases, book bags, scissors); organization of time (such as the daily schedule, working at the pace of the class/preschool class); and organization in space (such as in the classroom and in the school environment).
- **Handwriting difficulties.** Occupational therapists work with students who have problems with handwriting; illegible handwriting, difficulty organizing the written product, forming letters, slow writing, fatigue or inappropriate pressure..
- **Preparing older students for independent living.** Occupational therapists assist students to attain proper work habits, develop pre-vocational abilities and to select suitable work options.

Play and leisure

Occupational therapists assist the students in attaining play and leisure skills that can represent both the source of pleasurable activities and as a means of developing sensorimotor, cognitive, emotional and social skills. Areas of play include: sensorimotor play, imaginary games, structured play, playground play, social games and developing different hobbies.

Social participation

Occupational therapists work with students in improving social skills by organizing activity groups such as kitchen groups, self-care groups coffee-shop groups and play groups. One goal of such groups is to provide norms of acceptable social behavior and consideration of the group members as equals.

Duties of the occupational therapists in the school system Identification, testing and assessment

Occupational therapists view the assessment process as a basic and necessary component for determining the need for therapeutic intervention



and to build an intervention plan. The assessment is performed through observations of the children in the different environments in which they function; questionnaires and interviews with the students, teachers, parents and other therapists; standardized and informal assessments. The primary goal is to identify those students who are having difficulty in one or more of the occupational areas mentioned above. The students who are identified as being at-risk for, or that have difficulties, undergo an assessment, whose purposes are: (a) to get a comprehensive understanding of the student's current functional levels ; and (b) to examine enabling and limiting factors within the students, the environment and the interaction between them, which influence their ability to perform the tasks and activities which they need or want to perform. After the assessment process, the occupational therapist prepares a report that summarizes the factors that enable and limit the student's functioning and presents recommendations for the future. The assessment serves as the basis for deciding if the student requires occupational therapy services and for determining an intervention plan. Moreover, the assessment represents a baseline for determining the progress made in therapy.

Planning a treatment plan

In collaboration with the educational/therapy teams, the students and their family, the occupational therapists develop an intervention plan that includes: the short and long-term goals and the means to achieving them. These goals are part of the students' individual educational plan (IEP). The effectiveness of the intervention is determined by the degree to which the goals are attained. Thus, the goals determined must take into consideration the students' occupational performance and participation in different occupations in their daily life within the educational setting.

Intervention

The occupational therapy intervention can be performed in a variety of ways and often combine various intervention models.

Direct intervention. In the direct intervention model the occupational therapist works directly with one child or a group of students. The treatment can be performed in a therapy room, in the classroom, in the yard or in any other place where educational activities take place.

Indirect intervention. Indirect intervention includes different models such as consultation or monitoring, in which the occupational therapists guide one or more educational staff members on how to achieve treatment goals. Guidance can be provided at the level of an individual student, of an entire class or of the entire educational setting.



Adaptation of the educational environment. The occupational therapists assist in evaluating the environment,, and recommend changes in the environment that will meet the personal needs of the students and the requirements of the environment to enable the utmost participation of the students in the different activities of the educational setting. For example: adapting the work environment of the students in the classroom according to their needs (adjusting the seat and desk height to the student, adjusting the computer workstation, etc.), adapting the environment to optimize accessibility for students with motor disabilities (widening doorways, ramps) and adapting apparatus (such as playground equipment). For students with difficulty in sensory modulation, the occupational therapist assists in organizing the environment in a manner that will enable them to be receptive to learning.

Adapting assistive devices and personal assistive technology. Occupational therapists provide assistive devices to the students with the purpose of increasing their independence and functioning, including: adaptive seating, mobility, alternative means of communication (such as through computers and switches), as well as through splints, to improve, or prevention deterioration of function.

Working as part of a multidisciplinary team

The occupational therapists' work in the school system occurs in collaboration with all members of the staff who work with the students and includes: consultation and the exchange of information, determining goals and intervention for the students and deciding upon methods of intervention. This collaboration enables reciprocal enrichment and continuity of treatment.

Participation in the different activities of the educational setting

As part of their work in the school system, occupational therapists are expected to be involved in the following activities: staff meetings, developing individual educational plans (IEPs), home visits, and lectures to the staff, the parents and the students on topics related to the occupational therapists' area of expertise and in other activities that take place in the settings in which they work.

Work with the parents

The parents are active participants at each stage of the intervention. Work with the parents includes: collaboration in developing an individual educational plan for their child, guidance, consultation, recommendations for home activities and a reciprocal exchange of information (the communication with the parents is performed with the knowledge and coordination of the principal of the school setting).



Promotion of health

School-based occupational therapists are also expected to guide and consult with the students, families and educational staff in order to promote the health of the students in various topics such as the ergonomics (i.e., organization of the school environment, including aspects of noise, lighting, computer workstation), adaptive seating, carrying backpacks and the like.

Collaboration with the community

The school-based occupational therapists are expected to maintain contact with professionals in the community who treat the students, such as: doctors, community-based occupational therapists, physical therapists, speech and communication therapists, psychologists and social workers. In addition, school-based occupational therapists maintain contact with suppliers of therapeutic and adaptive equipment.

The decision regarding the desirable assessment method and treatment approach or model is the responsibility of occupational therapists in collaboration with the educational staff, according to the unique needs of the students.

This position paper was prepared by a subcommittee on Occupational Therapy in the School System that is appointed by the Occupational Therapy Higher Professional Committee: Dr. Naomi Weintraub, Rachel Fishman, Gila Sharon, Rivka Raanan, Rivka Tzadik, Dafna Yudovitch and Monica Winoker. Thanks also to all the occupational therapists that read the document prior to its publication and contributed their opinions and ideas.

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