What is Occupational Therapy?

'A simple definition of occupational therapy is that it helps people engage as independently as possible in the activities (occupations) which enhance their health and wellbeing' (BAOT).

Occupational therapy is a healthcare profession and aims to facilitate people to do the activities or occupations that are important to them. Occupation is the term used to describe all of the different activities that we carry out in our daily lives (self-care, leisure, school/work).

The role of the occupational therapist is to deliver occupation based-interventions that will enable people to carry out their daily lives to the satisfaction of themselves and others. Occupational therapists work with people of all age groups who may have diverse problems in a variety of settings.

Occupational Therapy in the School Setting

School-based occupational therapy is designed to enhance the student’s ability to fully access and be successful in the learning environment. In NBSS partner schools, occupational therapists collaborate with the student, parents, teachers, SNAs and other professionals with the goal of achieving the best school experience possible for the student.

OTs aim to enable the student to actively engage in learning, participate in all aspects of school life and ultimately, achieve his/her potential. OTs do this by:

Understanding and evaluating the nature of a student’s difficulties and how best to facilitate the fit between the child’s skills and abilities with the expectations of education and the demands of the curriculum.

Identifying the dynamic between the individual student and the school’s physical, social and cultural environment.

Supporting students to manage themselves within the classroom environment in order to promote learning.
How Do OTs Support Students?

All occupational therapy interventions are guided by evidence based theoretical models and frameworks e.g. Person-Environment-Occupation (P.E.O.) model and the Sensory Integration Theory.

Individual Work

Individual therapy sessions address occupational performance areas of concern. Areas of intervention can address:

- Organisation skills
- Sensory regulation strategies
- Handwriting
- Balance & coordination
- Anxiety management
- Self care issues

Group Work

The aim of group work is to develop a positive peer culture through a supportive group environment, which fosters engagement and participation and enables the students to develop and practice positive interpersonal skills such as:

- Listening
- Turn taking
- Problem solving
- Team work
- Respect & responsibility
- Choice
- Equality
- Positive self image

What are Sensory Integration Difficulties?

Students who have decreased ability to process sensation also may have difficulty producing appropriate actions, which interfere with learning and behaviour. Signs of sensory integration difficulties can include:

- Over/under response to touch, sound, vision, smell, movement and taste.
- Easily frustrated/aggressive.
- Distractible.
- Difficulties with transitions/new situations.
- Delayed motor skills (fine/gross).
- Unusually high/low activity levels.
- Problems with social interactions.

What can be done to help?

Identify the challenges that children with sensory regulation problems encounter in everyday life and in particular, in school.

Adapt the environment or activity/task to suit the student’s sensory needs.

Empower the student to self regulate his/her arousal level to suit the situational demands.
How Do OTs Support Students?

The ALERT Program

Occupational therapists in NBSS partner schools also use the international evidence-based ALERT Program ‘How Does Your Engine Run’ (Williams & Shellenberger, 2008). The programme aims to help students learn to monitor, maintain and change their level of alertness so that it is appropriate to situation or task.

Through activities and discussions, the programme identifies the students’ sensory needs/preferences and encourages the use of sensory motor strategies to support self regulation so students’ engines are running ‘just right’. The strategies and activities can be incorporated into home and school routines.

Environmental Audit

OTs understand the important impact of environmental factors on students.

The demands of a secondary school dictate that a student must negotiate a busy and often overwhelming environment on an hourly basis.

OTs are trained to assess a school’s physical & sensory environment and make recommendations for suitable alterations in order that students feel safe and comfortable accessing their classrooms.

Recommendations/Interventions would address:

- Classroom layout.
- Applying universal access guidelines.
- Way-finding techniques such as colour coding & signage.
- Advising on lighting & acoustic adaptations to create a calm environment.
- Design of inclusive, social & recreational spaces.

Occupational therapy interventions are more effective when integrated into the daily routines of the school and classroom environments.
Details of the New Post Primary School-based Occupational Therapy Service

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References


British Association Of Occupational Therapists and College of Occupational Therapists (BAOT). http://www.cot.co.uk

