



# What is Occupational Therapy?

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Occupational Therapy (or OT for short): everyone has heard of it, and many a child – and possibly some adults – has come into contact with it somewhere along the way... but what is it actually?

Occupational therapists help people to achieve independence in the activities or “occupations” of their daily life. But children don’t have occupations, you may ask. Yes they do: play! Children learn through doing. Thus, if a child has difficulty in certain areas, they may fall behind in their development and not be able to keep up with their peers. OT can help children who have various needs improve their physical, cognitive, sensory and motor skills and, most importantly, enhance their self-esteem and sense of achievement. The OT looks at all the different areas in a child’s life, such as how they play, their school performance and how they accomplish daily activities such as dressing and eating, and compares them with what is developmentally appropriate for that age group.



Through specialized intervention techniques, the OT may work on increasing muscle strength and range of motion in the hands and body, improve bilateral coordination (using both hands together in a coordinated manner), motor planning, visual perceptual skills, and sensory integration. Intervention may also include direct teaching and practice of a task such as tying shoe laces, cutting or writing, possibly with adaptations or modifications, which may be difficult for the child.

## *A child might need OT if, for example, they...*

- ... have low endurance, seem to get tired easily (especially while doing fine motor tasks), and have weak hands.
- ... have difficulty learning gross motor tasks such as hopping, skipping or riding a bike.
- ... are overly sensitive to sensory stimulation such as touch, the feel of different textures, tastes, sound, and movement.
- ... are under-responsive to movement, touch, or sound, or have unusually low emotional responses.
- ... have difficulty with writing, including having difficulty holding a pencil correctly, pressing too hard or not hard enough, having trouble with the size and spacing of letters.
- ... find dressing themselves to be difficult.

*There is a lot that parents can do to encourage normal development in their children, such as:*



### **Give your child lots of opportunity to play!**

Through play, the child is exposed to valuable sensorimotor experiences, allowing sensory integration to occur. Sensory integration generally develops automatically through everyday experiences, as the child takes in information about their body and the environment through their senses. These multi-sensory experiences are subconsciously analyzed, combined and

used to develop more complex skills. Through play, all the senses should be stimulated, so running, climbing, swinging, jumping on a trampoline, riding scooters or bikes, messy play, make-believe and imaginary play are all vitally important for normal development.

### **Encourage self-initiated movement in each of their early developmental phases.**

Give the child opportunity to move, explore their own abilities and learn. Minimize the time they spend in car seats, “snug-and-safe’s”, walking rings, moulded seats or anything that does not allow them to move freely. Give your baby time lying on a blanket on their back or tummy, encourage crawling and let them explore their world.



### **Expose your child to different activities.**

Play should include gross AND fine motor activities, as well as tactile, auditory and visual stimulation. Minimize the time spent in front of the TV or on the i-pad, and rather let your child listen to stories on CD, read to them, bake together, or let them play in the garden. Take out the



good old-fashioned board games once in a while. Talk to your children. Feed their imaginations... and rediscover the child in yourself!

Not all children need OT, but some may need just that little bit of help to cope with the challenges thrown at them every day.

#### **Helpful websites:**

- <http://www.ot-mom-learning-activities.com/>
- <http://therapystreetforkids.com/>

#### **References**

1. Exploring the Spectrum of Autism and Pervasive Developmental Disorders, Carolyn Murray-Slutsky; Therapy Skill Builders (2000)
2. Occupational Therapy for Children (6<sup>th</sup> edition), Case-Smith, O'Brien; Mosby Elsevier (2010)
3. [http://kidshealth.org/parent/system/ill/occupational\\_therapy.html](http://kidshealth.org/parent/system/ill/occupational_therapy.html)
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6. <http://www.smithsonianmag.com/science-nature/let-the-children-play-its-good-for-them-130697324/?no-ist>
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