
CAOT Position Statement: Occupations and health

The Canadian Association of Occupational Therapists (CAOT) strongly supports initiatives that enable all persons of Canada to have the opportunities and resources to engage in occupations for their health and well-being.

Occupations are groups of activities and tasks of everyday life, named, organized, and given value and meaning by individuals and a culture. Occupations include everything that people do to occupy themselves, including looking after themselves (self-care), enjoying life (leisure), and contributing to the social and economic fabric of their communities. Occupations are the core domain of concern and the therapeutic medium of occupational therapy (CAOT, 2002).

Health is more than the absence of disease. The link between everyday life and health has been recognized for centuries. The link has been highlighted internationally (World Health Organization, 1978; 2003) and Canada has been a world leader in emphasizing the importance of healthy lifestyles through health promotion initiatives (Epp, 1986; 1988).

CAOT Initiatives

To ensure Canadians have the resources and opportunities to engage in their relevant occupations of life, CAOT initiatives and activities include:

1. Develop workforce capacity in occupational therapy by ensuring the currency of the Profile of Occupational Therapy Practice in Canada that reflects the continuum of skills and knowledge required by occupational therapists for occupation-based and client-centred practice in Canada.
2. Develop and disseminate guidelines for occupational therapy practice in Canada that are occupation-based and client-centred. Advance leadership in occupational therapy by providing learning opportunities to enhance uptake of the guidelines (e.g. workshops, web-based seminars).
3. Promote and publish research evidence to facilitate knowledge of the concept of occupation and to understand the relationship between occupation and health.
4. Foster evidence-based occupational therapy by providing resources to enhance retrieval, critical

appraisal, utilization and evaluation of evidence to support occupational enablement.

5. Advocate for occupational therapy as an essential service by providing a public website that demonstrates the health benefit of occupational engagement and the value of occupational therapy services for occupational engagement.
6. Advocate for funding of occupation-based and client-centred occupational therapy services.
7. Promote accessibility to occupational therapy services by providing the online OT Finder database to assist the public in finding occupational therapists in their geographic area.
8. Contribute to health promotion policy through advocacy and research activities that identify obstacles to occupation and means to improve health.
9. Promote occupational therapy education curriculum centered on occupation and evidence-based practice.

Recommendations for occupational therapists:

1. Enable occupations with clients when there is presence of an occupational challenge and evidence of possible solution(s). Clients may be individuals, families, groups, communities, organizations, or populations, regardless of ability, age or other characteristics, who choose and engage in occupations which give meaning and purpose to their lives.
2. Establish a supportive practice environment that is client-centred, occupation-based and is grounded in the enablement foundation principles of change, justice, power sharing, visions of possibilities, client participation, respect for client choice, risk and responsibility.
3. Build alliances and catalyze media to raise client, public and government awareness of the health benefits of occupational engagement.
4. Use research evidence to identify best practices in occupational therapy that focus on occupations, enabling approaches in client-centred practice,

and outcomes related to occupational quality of life, empowerment and justice.

5. Create policies, funding, and legislation to integrate occupation-based enablement in government priorities to meet population needs through diverse programs and initiatives.
6. Target meaningful health outcomes relating to occupation and quality of life in service and workforce planning.
7. Advocate for policies and funding that will ensure access to occupational therapy services and support enabling occupation. For example, naming occupational therapy as an insured benefit in extended health plans will reduce barriers to access.
8. Build alliances to increase scholarship and evidence on an occupational perspective of health, well-being and justice, and occupation as a health benefit.

Background

Occupation is a basic human need as essential as food, drink and the air we breathe (Dunton, 1919). Occupation gives meaning to life and organizes behaviour. People make choices about the occupations they engage in to create a routine or daily pattern (Yerxa, 1998). Health is strongly influenced by having choice and control in everyday occupations.

Occupation has therapeutic potential. Health flourishes when people's occupations give meaning and purpose to life and are publicly valued by the society in which they live. Health and well-being is influenced by the ability to engage in life's occupations (Law, Steinwender, & Leclair, 1998). Engagement in occupation is complex; physical, psychological, spiritual, social, cultural, and political factors influence occupational wellness and dysfunction (Whiteford, Townsend, & Hocking, 2000; Wilcock, 1998). Withdrawal or changes in occupation can lead to increased dependency, lack of confidence and depression. Conversely, restoring an individual's ability to function independently and exercise choice and control over his/her daily activities increases productivity and life satisfaction.

Performance, organization, choice and satisfaction in occupations are determined by the relationship between persons and their environment (CAOT, 2002; Whiteford et al., 2002). The social and physical environment as well as personal health practices, income, education and literacy have a major impact on occupation and health (Government of Canada, 1999). Healthy patterns of occupation are shaped in homes, schools, places of employment, industries, transporta-

tion and other aspects of people's environment. For residents of Canada to be healthy and contribute to the economy, the determinants of health must be addressed (CAOT, 2001).

Occupation develops and changes over a lifetime. Health may be challenged during life transitions that require new patterns of occupation. People need to discover new patterns of occupation when they face barriers created by social crises, disability, illness, and the transitions of change over the lifespan. The aim is to assist in the discovery and creation of new patterns of occupation and new environments. Occupational therapists specialize in guiding people through personal and environmental change in times of transition.

Health is an unlimited resource for enhancing the social as well as economic productivity of society. Health is a personal resource through which people realize their own occupational goals and dreams. In developing healthy patterns of occupation, people and communities can flourish, become empowered and move towards social justice (Townsend, 1993). Occupational therapists' broad vision is to enable people who face emotional, physical or social barriers to develop healthy patterns of occupation. The aim is to enable people to choose meaningful occupations that develop their personal and social resources for health.

Occupations are idiosyncratic. People accumulate their occupational repertoires and develop their occupational patterns over the course of their lives according to interest, values and contexts. Therefore practice must identify client-specific goals or challenges and enable client specific solutions (Townsend & Polatajko, 2007, p. 208).

Glossary of Terms

Enabling (verb) – Enablement (noun): Focused on occupation, is the core competency of occupational therapy – what occupational therapists actually do – and draws on an interwoven spectrum of key and related enablement skills, which are value-based, collaborative, attentive to power inequities and diversity, and charged with visions of possibility for individual and/or social change.

Enabling occupation: Refers to enabling people to 'choose, organize, and perform those occupations they find useful and meaningful in their environment' (CAOT 1997, 2002, p. 180).

Occupations: Groups of activities and tasks of everyday life, named, organized, and given value and

meaning by individuals and a culture; everything people do to occupy themselves, including looking after themselves (self-care), enjoying life (leisure) and contributing to the social and economic fabric of their communities (productivity); the domain of concern and the therapeutic medium of occupational therapy (CAOT, 1997, 2002); a set of activities that is performed with some consistency and regularity; bring structure and are given meaning by individuals and a culture (adapted from Polatajko et al., 2004 and Zimmerman et al., 2006).

Occupational therapy: The art and science of enabling engagement in everyday living through occupation; enables people to perform the occupations that foster health and well-being; enable a just and inclusive society so that all people may participate to their potential in the daily occupations in life.

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