

Occupational Therapy and Autism Spectrum Disorder

What is Occupational Therapy?

Life is made up of meaningful everyday activities or occupations, such as walking the dog, gardening, preparing a meal, painting, doing the laundry and playing games. Occupations are part of life; they describe who we are and how we feel about ourselves. Occupations help bring meaning to life.

When we cannot participate in daily occupations, due to injury, illness, disability or social and environmental circumstances, occupational therapists help find solutions to address the meaningful everyday activities of life. Occupational therapy also helps prevent disability or illness and enhances the way we participate in our communities and lives. Occupational therapy helps us engage in the occupation of living.



What is Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)?

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is the most common developmental disability and neurological disorder affecting people across their lifespan, although usually first diagnosed in children. According to Autism Speaks Canada, an estimated 1 out of 42 boys and 1 in 189 girls are diagnosed with autism. ASD presents differently in every individual, impacting all aspects of an individual's development and occupational performance, including their ability to perform activities of self-care / daily living, and to participate in productive work (and education for children) and leisure and recreation activities, as well as overall, their ability to communicate and socially participate.

How do occupational therapists help?

Occupational therapists use their knowledge of sensory processing, emotional and behavioural regulation, oral/fine/gross motor development and task analysis to support learning and participation. Occupational therapists bring a unique and comprehensive perspective in the treatment of persons with ASD, in that they are highly educated and experienced to evaluate and provide intervention, both direct treatment and consultation to families, educators and caregivers, in the areas of physical, sensory processing, and social – emotional health in all environments of a person with an ASD. In addition, occupational therapists support the many transitions in life such as from home to daycare, from daycare to school, and from school to society, including vocational or productive work environments. Occupational therapists provide support to families through education, consultation, advocacy and assisting with access to community resources.

What do occupational therapists do?

- Help clients achieve optimum independence and well-being, considering their personal goals, interests and motivation.
- Assess skills and create intervention plans to promote participation of the individual within their daily routine.
- Provide developmentally appropriate goals related to play, social interactions, attention, motor skills, self-care, etc.
- Support learning and participation through their knowledge of sensory processing, emotional and behavioural regulation, oral/fine/gross motor development and task analysis.
- Recommend modifications or accommodations to activities and the environment that help people with ASD participate in activities at home, at school and in the community.
- Assess driving capacities, develop vocational skills, and explore independent living options
- Help clients achieve optimum independence and well-being.
- Support clients and families through education, consultation, advocacy.
- Help clients in developing intimate relationships through education on relationships and on sexuality.
- Contribute to interprofessional teams which include psychologists, psychiatrists, behavioural therapists, early interventionists, social workers, educators, vocational counsellors and life skills workers.

Where do occupational therapists work?

Occupational therapists work with health care and other professionals in a variety of places, such as long term care facilities, community support services, family health teams, hospitals and clients' homes. Occupational therapists also work with organizations, such as government, policy makers, care providers and community agencies to develop programs and resources.

Occupational therapy works!

William is a summer camp director. Over the years, he and staff had to dismiss a few campers with challenging behaviours. They had difficulties including these children in camp activities. He was quite bothered by this situation and knew that they needed help. They met with an occupational therapist who trained all staff to help integrate the campers in the camp activities, empower camp monitors, supervisors and coordinators with tools to resolve challenging situations, develop their self-confidence in providing service to all our campers, including campers with challenging behaviours. Because of occupational therapy, William is proud that his campers with challenging behaviours can engage in camp activities, and are better understood by his summer camp staff.