

Occupational Therapy and School Mental Health



What Is School Mental Health, and How Does It Impact Student Success?

Mental health can be defined as “...a state of successful performance of mental function, resulting in productive activities, fulfilling relationships with other people, and the ability to adapt to change and to cope with adversity” (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 1999). School mental health can be defined as any mental health service or support provided in a school setting (Kutash, Duchnowski, & Lynn, 2006).

Children need to develop positive interaction skills and appropriate classroom behavior so they can successfully participate in school. School is the place where children learn academics and develop social-emotional skills by making and keeping friends, coping with feelings and stress, learning to self-advocate, and interacting in groups.

Some children may have difficulty interacting with peers or maintaining self-control, leading to problems in making and keeping friends and paying attention in the classroom. Sometimes these problems are due to a mental illness and sometimes the cause of the troublesome behaviors is not clear. In order for a child to demonstrate appropriate classroom behavior, he or she may benefit from helpful routines for planning and organizing personal materials, tasks, and activities in order to pay attention and participate in activities with educators and classmates.

What Is Occupational Therapy, and How Do Services Address Students’ Mental Health Needs?

In schools, occupational therapy practitioners support students to succeed in their daily routines including classroom, playground, lunchroom, and extracurricular activities. An occupational therapy practitioner has a strong foundation in human development and activity participation. Occupational therapy practitioners have specialized knowledge and skills in

- social and emotional learning and regulation;
- task analysis, including sensory, motor, cognitive, and social components;
- assistive technology; and
- activity and environmental modifications.

Occupational therapy practitioners support a student’s transition between activities, and from grade to grade and school

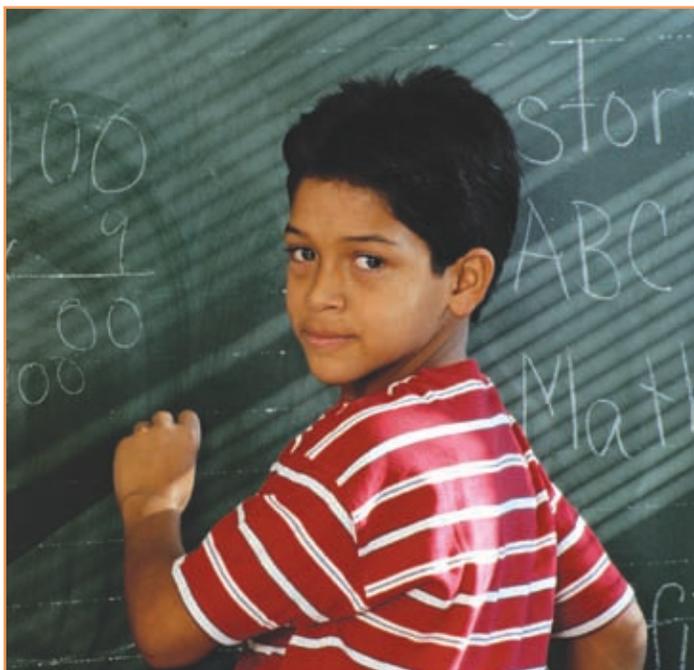
to school by helping build the capacity for school success through the development of study skills, self-care independence, problem-solving abilities, social skills, and vocational interests. Occupational therapy practitioners address the sensory needs of students as well as the aspects within the school environment that impact learning.

Occupational therapy services are used to help children develop productive habits and routines that support their physical, intellectual, and emotional health and growth. When children's abilities are well matched with the demands of an activity and the environment where they live, learn, and play, they can better cope with challenges and succeed in a variety of school activities.

Occupational therapy practitioners offer direct services to individuals and small groups, as well as interventions for whole classrooms. They also offer consultation to and collaboration with the entire school team (e.g., social workers, nurses, guidance counselors, speech-language pathologists) to support a student's learning, daily living skills, play and leisure activities, and beginning work skills. In addition, occupational therapy practitioners are often key members of child and adolescent mental health teams.

How Do Occupational Therapy Practitioners Collaborate With the School Team?

Occupational therapy practitioners support and collaborate with all members of the school team, including parents. They can help team members identify and implement modifications to activities and environments. These modifications may increase the potential for successful student participation in the classroom or in extracurricular activities.



Occupational therapy practitioners are frequently asked to introduce calming or organizing classroom strategies, such as breathing exercises for relaxation before test taking, to reduce stress and promote learning. These strategies are often developed to foster effective classroom routines. Practitioners may support carefully designed activities to provide graded opportunities to practice and build skills, abilities, and self-confidence.

When an occupational therapist evaluates a child in the school setting, the student's strengths, abilities, and needs are identified. The occupational therapist may collect information through formal and/or informal assessments, parent interviews, and/or a review of work samples. After the occupational therapist evaluates a child's motor, sensory, cognitive, and emotional needs and strengths, including observing the child's performance during school routines, he or she might work with other team members to introduce methods to help that child build skills needed for successful participation. Then the occupational therapy practitioner meets with the school team, including parents, to provide information about the student's level of function along with recommendations that support learning, socialization, improved functioning, and independence.

How Does the Occupational Therapy Practitioner Promote Mental Health in Students?

School-based occupational therapy is available for a broad range of students—those who are eligible for special education under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004 (IDEA) as well as those who do not qualify for special education but require additional behavioral and/or academic supports in the general educational environment for school success. Through this prevention model, occupational therapy practitioners may offer whole-classroom strategies, support small groups of students, or work with individual students identified as “at risk” for functional and/or cognitive decline.

Table 1 provides examples of occupational therapy services within a public health model, including promotion, prevention, and intervention.

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Table 1. Occupational Therapy Under a Prevention Model

Whole School (all students supported)

- **Conduct** a workshop for educators and/or families on addressing sensory needs of all students, with or without identified disabilities.
- **Work** with teachers to create group projects that can bridge academics and student needs for socio-emotional growth, as well as accommodate different learning styles.
- **Design** a “quiet area” within a classroom that may include alternative seating to calm and organize the student who is easily distracted or prone to emotional outbursts.
- **Help** teachers develop individualized goals for each student based on individual needs (strengths; challenges; outside interests; sensory, cognitive, and social skills) and create strategies to creatively address these goals during class time.

Targeted Groups (at-risk* students supported)

- **Organize** a lunchroom or playground buddy group to promote social skill development and build peer relationships.
- **Consult** with educators and recommend strategies to support a student who is struggling to complete classroom assignments.
- **Facilitate** the development of social skills and meaningful activities for at-risk students via therapeutic games, group work, exploration of hobbies, etc.

* “At-risk” refers to individual issues that could interfere with learning.

Individual Interventions (high-risk students supported)

- **Recommend** schedule modifications to reduce stress or anxiety (e.g., additional opportunities for creative expression or physical activity).
- **Conduct** screenings or assessments to help develop a behavioral intervention plan.
- **Develop** a meaningful functional activity for greater self-efficacy and social participation.
- **Modify** classroom environments and activities as needed to promote and support student learning.

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Related Resources

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For more information, contact the American Occupational Therapy Association, the professional society of occupational therapy, representing nearly 36,000 occupational therapists, occupational therapy assistants, and students working in practice, science, education, and research.

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