

TALKING ABOUT SPECIAL EDUCATION SERIES

VOLUME 11

OCCUPATIONAL THERAPY

INFORMATION BOOKLET



This pamphlet is one of a series of resources prepared by the First Nations Schools Association (FNSA) and First Nations Education Steering Committee (FNESC) to share information about how to support all First Nations students, regardless of their needs.

FNSA MANDATE:

to collaborate with First Nation schools to create nurturing environments that develop learners' pride and competence in their First Nations language and heritage and equip them to realize their full potential within self-governing First Nations communities.

FNESC MANDATE:

to facilitate discussion about education matters affecting First Nations in BC by disseminating information to and soliciting input from First Nations. FNESC's primary goal is to promote and support the provision of a quality education to First Nations learners.

We hope that these pamphlets provide a useful overview of key special education topics, representing an introduction to issues that some people may want to investigate in more detail. Anyone who requires more information or has specific questions is welcome to contact the FNESC/FNSA special education staff.



Published May 2021

© First Nations Education Steering Committee and First Nations Schools Association, 2021
Suite 113 - 100 Park Royal South, West Vancouver, BC V7T 1A2 www.fnesc.ca

Phone (604) 925-6087 | Toll-free in BC 1-877-422-3672

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior written permission of the author.

WHAT IS OCCUPATIONAL THERAPY?

Occupational therapy is used to promote improved health, and to prevent or help people better live with injury, illness, or disability.

In the field of occupational therapy, when a person is unable to participate in the activities that they need or want to do, this is referred to as “an occupational performance issue.” In this context, “occupation” means the various kinds of activities that people do on a regular basis, including actions performed in daily living, rest and sleep, and tasks that are regularly undertaken in education, work, play, leisure, and social situations.

Generally, “occupational performance issues” can arise in the areas of self-care, productivity, and leisure occupations. For students ...

“Self-Care Occupations” relate to taking care of oneself, such as:

- dressing, including getting shoes and jacket on and off
- independent feeding / meal time activities
- using the bathroom independently
- attending to hygiene
- organizing one’s belongings
- getting to and from school safely

“Productivity Occupations” relate to the ability to attend and participate meaningfully in school, such as:

- completing academic work
- participating in cultural learning
- paying attention to the teacher
- using supplies and materials
- following directions
- working in groups or in centres
- participating in circle time
- completing written outputs or alternatives

NOTE: in this pamphlet, we use the term “parent” for simplicity, but the information is intended to be inclusive of all family members/caregivers of students with special needs. FNEsc and the FNSA respect and appreciate the invaluable contributions of everyone who works to support all First Nations students – regardless of their special talents, gifts, or challenges.

“Leisure Occupations” involve appropriately participating in quiet or active recreation activities and joining in socialization opportunities, such as:

- free time in the classroom
- recess
- extracurricular and after school activities
- social interactions with peers or adults

When students experience difficulties with any of these “occupations,” it can negatively affect their engagement, independence, and overall success at school. In response, occupational therapy services are needed.

Occupational therapy supports are provided to a wide variety of children, including students with physical limitations, learning disorders, hearing or visual problems, behaviour or emotional challenges, or delayed development.

Early identification and interventions to address occupational performance issues can lessen or even eliminate the need for occupational therapies later in life.

School-Based Occupational Therapy

School-based occupational therapists (OTs) are registered health care professionals who evaluate and help solve any problems that may be interfering with a student's ability to participate in activities that are important in the school context and in their everyday lives.

OTs examine the interaction of students with their environments and the occupations with which they are engaged. OTs identify and assess which issues are affecting a student's "occupations," including the following.

FINE MOTOR DIFFICULTIES

Some students may have difficulty with fine motor skills, meaning that they might:

- Have an awkward or immature pencil grasp for their age.
- Have messy, slow, or laborious drawing, colouring or writing skills.
- Tire quickly when engaged in fine motor tasks, including typing or using a mouse on a computer.
- Have difficulty when using scissors or other similar supplies / tools.
- Have difficulty performing precise manipulation tasks (i.e. doing up buttons, sewing, or tying shoelaces).
- Dislike precise hand and eye coordination tasks (e.g. construction using toys with tiny pieces, beading, etc.).
- Have difficulty performing age appropriate self-care tasks independently.
- Be verbally skilled but have difficulty demonstrating their abilities on paper or using the computer (i.e. writing, drawing or colouring, or using the keyboard or mouse)

This challenge might also be shown in the following behaviours when a student is asked to perform tasks that require fine motor skills.

- Avoiding or refusing to participate, including asking others to do things for them, such as asking "can someone tie my shoelaces for me?"

or “can someone else colour in this graph?”

- Showing frustration and possibly acting out.
- Demonstrating a lack of confidence or low self-esteem, possibly saying things like “I’m just no good at doing that. I can’t do things like the other kids.”

SENSORY PROCESSING CHALLENGES

Sensory processing issues may also inhibit a student’s “occupational performance.” “Sensory processing” refers to how people organize and respond to input from their senses - which some students can experience as over-sensitivity, under-sensitivity, or both.

Signs that a student may have sensory processing challenges can differ depending on the trigger – that is, the sensory input that impacts the student, and depending on the type of specific sensory processing challenge of each individual.

Some students can have “over-sensitivity,” which means they will feel overwhelmed by things like loud noises, bright or flickering lights, uncomfortable clothing, crowded spaces, or certain food smells or textures, among other kinds of triggers. This type of sensory overload can lead to meltdowns that are not in the student’s control.

Students who have over-sensitivity may be “sensory-avoiding,” and they may:

- Be easily overwhelmed by people and places
- Seek out quiet spots in noisy, crowded environments
- Be easily startled by sudden noises
- Be bothered by bright light
- Refuse to wear itchy or otherwise uncomfortable clothing
- Avoid touching or hugging other people
- Have a strong reaction to the texture or smell of certain foods
- Refuse to try new foods and have a very limited diet of preferred foods
- Get upset about small changes in routine or environment and avoid trying new things
- Be wary about some physical activities, such as using playground or gym equipment

Other students may be under-sensitive to sensory input and may seek out sensory stimulation. These students may:

- Constantly touch objects
- Play roughly and take physical risks
- Have a high tolerance for pain
- Often squirm and fidget
- Be constantly on the move
- Invade other people’s personal space
- Often get distracted or feel anxious
- Appear clumsy and uncoordinated

EMOTIONAL SELF-REGULATION DIFFICULTIES

Occupational therapy can also be helpful for students who experience emotional self-regulation difficulties. This term refers to the ability to manage emotions and behaviours and to resist highly emotional reactions to upsetting stimuli. People use emotional self-regulation to calm themselves down when they get upset, to adjust to changes in expectations, and to handle frustration appropriately and without excessive outbursts. Emotional self-regulation involves a set of skills that enable students to control their own feelings and behaviours in unpredictable situations.

EXECUTIVE FUNCTIONING CHALLENGES

Students with executive functioning difficulties often struggle to organize materials, regulate emotions, set schedules, and stick with tasks. They often misplace papers, reports, and other school materials, and they often have similar problems keeping track of their personal items or keeping spaces organized. For some students, strategies such as incentives and rewards can help with these issues. OTs can also help school staff consider alternatives such as binders or folders stored in a place other than the student's desk, and OTs may recommend the use of fidget devices to keep students' busy hands occupied. Many other responses may also be useful.

CAUTION:

It is important to remember that many students may demonstrate some signs of the challenges described above from time to time without requiring specialist services. **For example, many young children struggle to use scissors or other small devices or complicated toys effectively, some children will learn to ride a tricycle later than others, etc., and it is important not to over-react to minor developmental differences too early.** However, if the indicators are serious, persistent, and/or interfere with a student's performance or self-esteem, assessment support and advice from an OT can help to identify specific responses appropriate for individual students.

Planning To Address Student Needs

Teachers and other school staff can implement a range of strategies to help students who may have “occupational” challenges.

For example, for students who are especially sensitive to clothing, such as socks with seams or winter toques and mittens, OTs can suggest websites to purchase seamless clothing and other relevant alternatives.

Students who have a range of exceptionalities function better in classroom environments that use calm, minimal colours and do not include too many decorations / materials that are draped around the room and are overly distracting or stimulating. Some students also may find it challenging to learn if there are unusual smells, too much clutter, undo noise from outside the classroom, or excessive humming sounds from the lights or heaters.

In addition to considering those environmental factors, it can be helpful for many students to simply reduce the brightness of the lighting in the classroom or specific areas in the classroom, and consider the classroom arrangement carefully to minimize overstimulation and provide quieter spaces for particular students. It is also useful to limit noise and allow students

with over-sensitivity to use headphones when other students are working in groups or are involved in activities that mean noise levels will be raised higher than normal. Many students will also benefit from other strategies that will allow them to retreat for a quiet time-out if they feel overwhelmed.

OTs and educators also can collaboratively help to plan relevant instructional activities for implementation in the classroom. Together, they can:

- identify curricular modifications to support a student’s learning abilities;
- optimize student participation and safety by identifying adaptations and accommodations to classroom structures and procedures, school indoor and outdoor facilities, and equipment; and
- consider a range of supports for student behaviours to mitigate their occupational challenges.

Tips For Schools to Help Families

School staff, working with an OT, can also take steps to ensure that school and home responses are complementary and consistent for the benefit of students who have occupational difficulties. Supports for families and caregivers may include the following.

- Provide information to families and caregivers about their child's occupational performance difficulties.
- Involve families and caregivers in the development of Individual Education Plans. Encourage them to share what they know and to contribute to the identification of relevant smart goals.
- Help families and students feel confident self-advocating and determining needed supports.
- Collaborate with families and caregivers so they understand how to integrate mitigation strategies into their daily routines.
- Demonstrate any equipment and assistive technology students might be using at school.
- Suggest activities that are a "just right fit" for each student's needs and circumstances, which will build the student's skills and confidence at home and in other environments.
- Help families know how to monitor stress levels, which can be a significant concern for students with occupational performance difficulties.
- Connect families and caregivers with other resources and educational opportunities, as needed.
- Make sure caregivers are comfortable and informed about their child's overall educational program and progress.

Summary

As is the case with most student exceptionalities, early identification and interventions for students with occupational challenges is highly effective for helping students to achieve the best outcomes possible.

If students are found to need occupational therapy services, OTs can use their specific knowledge and expertise to help students increase their participation in school routines throughout the day. OTs can analyze the school environment and make recommendations to improve access, possibly through assistive technologies, and to reduce barriers that might limit a student's participation in school and day-to-day life.

Students with occupational performance challenges can achieve their goals when they are supported with educational assessments and learning opportunities that are properly designed to meet their unique needs. When education teams with the right specialists work together to address students' physical and mental health needs, all students can be successful in school and in transitioning to appropriate post-high school employment, independent living, and/or post-secondary education opportunities.

VOLUMES AVAILABLE IN THE

TALKING ABOUT SPECIAL EDUCATION SERIES:

VOLUME 1: AN OVERVIEW

VOLUME 2: AN INTRODUCTION FOR PARENTS / FAMILIES

VOLUME 3: INDIVIDUAL EDUCATION PLANS

VOLUME 4: A PARENT'S GUIDE TO INDIVIDUAL EDUCATION PLANS

VOLUME 5: SPEECH AND LANGUAGE THERAPY

VOLUME 6: ATTENTION DEFICIT / ATTENTION DEFICIT HYPERACTIVE
DISORDER

VOLUME 7: FETAL ALCOHOL SPECTRUM DISORDERS

VOLUME 8: AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDERS

VOLUME 9: GIFTED EDUCATION

VOLUME 10: TRAUMA

VOLUME 11: OCCUPATIONAL THERAPY

VOLUME 12: PHYSIOTHERAPY

VOLUME 13: ASSISTIVE TECHNOLOGY

VOLUME 14: POSITIVE BEHAVIOURAL INTERVENTIONS

FOR MORE INFORMATION:



FIRST NATIONS EDUCATION STEERING COMMITTEE
FIRST NATIONS SCHOOLS ASSOCIATION

#113 - 100 Park Royal South, West Vancouver, BC V7T 1A2

604-925-6087 | Toll-free in BC 1-877-422-3672
info@fnesc.ca

www.fnesc.ca