



# On the Job With a Pediatric Occupational Therapist

By Brigid Baker, OTR/L

I am often asked, “What is the most challenging part of your job?” Several obvious answers come to mind. It could be educating the concerned parents of a 3-year-old recently diagnosed with autism. Or it may be working with a second or third grader who is struggling to learn cursive and shoe tying. It may be helping a child with coordination and balance difficulties learn to ride a bike or climb a ladder to the slide on the playground.

While all of these examples are indeed a part of my job as a pediatric occupational therapist, in truth, the most challenging aspect of my day is explaining—often to friends, acquaintances and even family members—what occupational therapy is and when a child may benefit from our services.

## Job Description

According to the American Occupational Therapy Association (AOTA), occupational therapy (OT) is a “science-driven, evidence-based profession that enables people of all ages to live life to its fullest by helping them promote health and prevent—or live better with—illness, injury or disability.” Today, occupational therapists work in a variety of settings with adults, including the mental health arena, inpatient and outpatient hospital settings and hand-therapy clinics, as well as in ergonomics and work rehabilitation programs. The opportunities for pediatric occupational therapists extend to early intervention facilities, school systems, home health services

and outpatient centers.

The goal of a pediatric occupational therapist is for a child to be able to participate in daily life activities or “occupations.” A child’s occupations are developmentally appropriate activities that may simply include crawling, reaching for a toy, eating a snack, tossing a ball or coloring. For a child with a medical diagnosis, motor delay, impairment in sensory processing or lag in reaching developmental milestones, the ability to participate in these daily occupations is compromised. Occupational therapists can evaluate a child’s strengths, as well as difficulties, in critical developmental areas and design interventions that promote the healthy development of skills needed for success with daily tasks. Through meaningful

activities and play, OT facilitates the development of age-appropriate skills.

Specifically, pediatric OT may focus on fine-motor skills, including using your hands and printing, self-help skills, such as feeding, dressing and bathing, thinking skills, such as shape recognition, and pre-school and school skills, like following directions and solving problems.

Now that it is clear that occupational therapists do not help children find jobs (a misconception I often hear), how does a parent know if and when her child needs OT? The following brief list highlights possible questions parents can ask to determine if an evaluation may be needed.

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### Fine-Motor Skill Development

Does your child:

- Have an immature pencil grasp or difficulty manipulating small objects?
- Have difficulty fastening clothing (buttons, zippers, snaps, laces)?
- Experience trouble controlling a fork or spoon?
- Avoid toys with small parts requiring assembly (Legos, K'Nex)?

### Gross-Motor Skill Development/ Coordination

Does your child:

- Appear weak with decreased muscle strength?
- Appear awkward or clumsy during play?
- Have less endurance compared to peers or fatigue easily?
- Have difficulty learning to ride a bike or scooter?

### Visual-Motor Integration

Does your child:

- Have illegible writing?
- Demonstrate decreased awareness of sizing and spacing of letters and words?
- Avoid coloring or writing activities?
- Have immature drawing skills?

### Sensory Processing

Does your child:

- Complain about certain textures of clothing?
- Have a limited food repertoire or seem to be a picky eater?
- Cover her ears in response to certain noises or notice noises others don't hear?
- Avoid messy play with her hands?
- Have difficulty sitting still,

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idget often or seem to be "always on the go"?

- Seek or crave "heavy" movement experiences (jumping, crashing)?

As when any question or concern arises regarding a child's health and development, parents should seek the advice of their family pediatrician who may make the recommendation for an OT evaluation, as well as additional assessments to rule out other problems.

Having a solid foundation of skills allows for the development of self-confidence, and OT may help a child to develop age-appropriate skills to be successful in her daily activities (occupations). Developing a skill and using it successfully encourages us to continually try new activities that expand our skills and build success, and being successful is the foundation for continued learning.

**Brigid Baker is director of outpatient occupational therapy at TLC—The Treatment and Learning Centers (tlc.org), a nonprofit organization based in Rockville and founded in 1950 that offers multiple services for children and adults with special needs.**