



# Occupational Therapy's Role With Autism

## What is autism?

Autism is a developmental disorder—typically diagnosed around age 3 years—that affects brain functions, specifically those areas that control social behaviors and communication skills. The National Institute of Child Health and Human Development uses the term *autism spectrum disorders (ASDs)* to refer to a group of disorders that include autistic disorder (also called “classic autism”), Asperger’s syndrome, and pervasive developmental disorders not otherwise specified (also called “atypical autism”). However, the term *autism* is frequently used in the literature to describe all of the disorders in the ASD spectrum.<sup>1</sup>

## What is the focus of occupational therapy with individuals with autism?

Occupational therapy services focus on enhancing participation in and performance of activities of daily living (e.g., feeding, dressing), instrumental activities of daily living (e.g., community mobility, safety procedures), education, work, leisure, play, and social participation. For an individual with ASD, occupational therapy services are defined according to the individual’s needs and desired goals and priorities for participation.

Occupational therapy services for individuals with ASD include evaluation, intervention, and measurement of outcomes. Throughout the process, collaboration with the child or adult with autism, family, caregivers, teachers, and other supporters is essential to understanding the daily life experiences of the individual and those with whom he or she interacts. Occupational therapy services can focus on personal development, quality of life, and the needs of the family.

The occupational therapy evaluation process is designed to gain an understanding of the individual’s skills—his or her strengths and challenges while engaging in occupations and activities. The occupational therapy intervention process is based on the results of the evaluation and is individualized to foster occupational engagement and social participation through techniques and procedures directed at the client, activity, and environment. Occupational therapy uses a variety of intervention approaches to stimulate active engagement in activity.

Outcomes or progress is noted through improved occupational performance, client satisfaction, role competence, improved health and wellness, prevention of further difficulties, and improved quality of life.<sup>2</sup> These measures can help the individual, family, and team

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1. Maternal and Child Health Library. (2006). *Knowledge path: Autism spectrum disorder*. Retrieved February 21, 2006, from [http://mchlibrary.info/KnowledgePaths/kp\\_autism.html](http://mchlibrary.info/KnowledgePaths/kp_autism.html)

2. American Occupational Therapy Association. (2005). Statement: The scope of occupational therapy services for individuals with autism spectrum disorders across the lifespan. *American Journal of Occupational Therapy*, 59, 680–683.

appreciate success and renew the focus and priorities of the intervention plan.

Occupational therapists and occupational therapy assistants help people with autism find ways to adjust tasks and conditions that match their needs and abilities. Such help may include adapting the environment to minimize external distractions, finding specially designed computer software that facilitates word processing to ease communication, or identifying skills that build capabilities.<sup>3</sup>

### Where do occupational therapists and occupational therapy assistants work with individuals with autism?

Occupational therapists and occupational therapy assistants provide interventions to clients in the environments where they typically engage in their occupations, such as a child care center or preschool, school, home, worksite, adult day care, residential setting, or any range of community settings. The role of the occupational therapy practitioner may be as a provider of direct services; as a job coach; or as a consultant to family members, educators, employers, or team members.

### What information do occupational therapy practitioners offer to families and to teams?

Occupational therapy assistants and occupational therapists help families and other people learn how to adapt the environment to increase the comfort and performance of individuals with ASD. Occupational therapy assistants and occupational therapists also can provide information about other services that may support the individual or family.

### What occupational therapy services are available for people with autism?

Occupational therapy intervention helps individuals with autism develop or improve appropriate social, play, learning, community mobility, and vocational skills. The occupational therapy practitioner aids the individual in achieving and maintaining normal daily tasks such as getting dressed, engaging in social interactions, completing school activities, and working or playing.<sup>4</sup>

### What can occupational therapists do?

- Evaluate an individual to determine whether he or she has accomplished developmentally appropriate skills needed in such areas as grooming and play or leisure skills.
- Provide interventions to help a child appropriately respond to information coming through the senses. Intervention may include

developmental activities, sensory integration or sensory processing, and play activities.

- Facilitate play activities that instruct as well as aid a child in interacting and communicating with others.
- Devise strategies to help the individual transition from one setting to another, from one person to another, and from one life phase to another.
- Collaborate with the individual and family to identify safe methods of community mobility.
- Identify, develop, or adapt work or engagement in meaningful activities that enhance the individual's quality of life.

### How can I find occupational therapy services?

Pediatricians can help parents identify early intervention programs available through a state's Department of Social Services or Department of Health. These programs can refer young children and their families to occupational therapy and other needed services. Preschool and school-age children and youth (to age 21) may be eligible for occupational therapy services under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act or Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act. Services also may be available through local health centers, hospitals, private clinics, and home health agencies. Additionally, adults with ASD who need occupational therapy services may find resources through developmental disability programs or social services agencies.

### Who pays for occupational therapy services?

Occupational therapy is a skilled health, rehabilitation, and education service covered by private insurance, Medicare, Medicaid, worker's compensation, vocational programs, behavioral health programs, early intervention, and school programs. Services also may be covered through Social Security, state mental health or mental retardation agencies, health and human services agencies, private foundations, and grants. Many providers accept private payments. ■

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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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Occupational Therapy: Skills for the Job of Living

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3. National Institute of Child Health and Human Development. (2005, May). *Autism overview: What we know* (NIH Pub. No. 05-5592, p. 8). Washington, DC: Author.

4. American Occupational Therapy Association. (2002). *Understanding autism* [Fact Sheet]. Bethesda, MD: Author.

American Occupational Therapy Association. (2002). Occupational therapy practice framework: Domain and process. *American Journal of Occupational Therapy*, 56, 609–639.