Occupational Therapy Australia

Understanding occupational therapy in education



Inclusive education is not just about access - it's about meaningful participation.

Occupational therapists play a vital role in helping students engage in the everyday routines and learning experiences that make up school life.

Occupational therapists (OTs) support students to engage in all aspects of school life. From the classroom to the playground, from mealtimes to managing emotions, OTs work to ensure every student can participate meaningfully and successfully in the everyday activities that make up school life.

Occupational therapists can support whole schools approaches, classrooms, small groups, or individual students. This may include building student skills, adapting environments, or modifying tasks to promote inclusion, access, engagement and participation.



How do occupational therapists work in education?

Occupational therapists can be employed in a range of ways, and this will influence how they may work.

Occupational therapists could be employed:

- Directly by schools and education systems, working collaboratively to support the entire school community through individual, group-level and whole-school strategies.
- Through external funding bodies, such as the NDIS (National Disability Insurance Scheme), focusing primarily on individual students.

Regardless of employment and funding type, occupational therapists work collaboratively with teachers, families, care partners and students to support participation in learning and school life. Rather than working in isolation, occupational therapists work alongside students, educators, parents/caregivers and other supporting professions to develop solutions together to maximise student access to the curriculum. The focus is on exploring achievable and practical strategies that align with the flow and demands of the classroom and everyday school life.

Occupational therapists also work together with educators, sharing strategies, tools and insights that can be embedded into daily practices. This supports inclusive education for all students, not just those with additional needs.

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What does OT support look like? A tiered approach

Occupational therapy support is often best understood through a tiered model (such as Multi-tiered Systems of Support).

Examples of occupational therapy in action (non-exhaustive list)

Tier 1: Whole school/universal examples

- Conduct school-wide reviews to identify physical, sensory, attitudinal, and environmental barriers (e.g. classroom layout, acoustics, lighting, playgrounds, ramps)
- Contribute to school policies related to inclusion, participation, and accessibility
- Deliver professional learning for teachers or parents on topics such as:
  - Regulation and emotional wellbeing
  - Motor skill development, milestones and strategies
  - Inclusive classroom strategies
  - Trauma-informed and neurodiversity affirming approaches

Tier 2: Group/targeted examples

- Programs targeting:
  - Handwriting, keyboarding and fine motor skills
  - Sensory regulation strategies
  - Emotions literacy (and interoception)

Tier 3: Individualised/intensive examples

- Create personalised programs to address specific goals (e.g. managing transitions, organising belongings)
- Recommend accommodations and adaptations (e.g. adapted tools and utensils, visual schedules, sensory tools, modified routines)
- Recommend assistive technology to enable access to school environments and the curriculum (e.g. specialised seating, adapted classroom furniture, computer access devices, mobility devices)
- Support participation in school excursions and camps by collaboratively planning with the student, school and family

Why occupational therapy?

Occupational therapists are university trained clinicians with a minimum of a bachelor's degree. They are regulated by the Australian Health Practitioner Regulation Agency (Ahpra) and have strict rules and guidelines regarding safe and ethical practice.

Occupational therapy is goal-oriented, practical, evidence-based and student-centered, and success is measured on a student's engagement and participation in real-life tasks like:

- Using the playground safely
- Managing emotions in class
- Participating in group activities
- Recording schoolwork
- Being engaged in school routines

Occupational therapy offers a strengths-based approach, helping students, staff and families see what's possible when the right supports are in place.



Want to learn more about occupational therapy?

To find out more about how occupational therapy can support your school community, explore our website by **scanning the QR code** or visiting **otaus.com.au.**

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