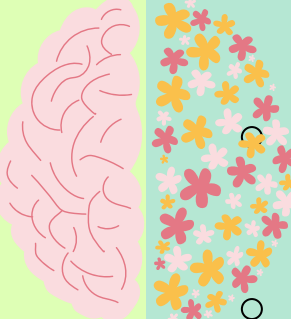


OCCUPATIONAL THERAPY IN PEDIATRIC MENTAL HEALTH

Prepared by Maya Ortega, OTS and Bella Schaerf, OTS

What is Pediatric Mental Health Occupational Therapy?

- Occupational therapists (OTs) working in mental health settings promote mental health and support full participation in life for people who have mental health conditions or are at risk of experiencing mental health challenges (OTAC, 2021).
- OTs utilize occupations, also known as meaningful activities, to foster mental health, well-being, and enhanced quality of life. (OTAC, 2021).
- Pediatric mental health occupational therapy addresses occupations relevant to different stages of childhood and adolescence such as self-care, play, school participation, leisure activities, and social participation to promote well-being among children and adolescents with mental health needs.
 - OTs working in pediatric mental health can see clients from infancy through young adulthood, often ages 0-21.
 - These OTs address emotional, social, and cognitive needs affecting children’s mental health and daily functioning.



Role of Occupational Therapists in Pediatric Mental Health

- Pediatric mental health OTs can provide a variety of services to children and their caregivers to support overall daily functioning and wellbeing:
 - Setting client and family goals for areas of growth in overall functioning and daily participation, such as in emotional regulation, transitioning between activities, time management, coping strategies, frustration tolerance, and daily routines
 - Exploring healthy leisure activities, interests, and coping strategies
 - Role exploration and development with caregivers and children
 - Preparing for role and identity changes with life transitions, such as starting a new school or preparing to graduate
 - Social participation skill-building, including interpersonal communication and social skills
 - Creating habits and routines that support mental health needs and overall wellness
 - Building self-awareness, body awareness, and interoception
 - Interoception: understanding of your body’s internal senses (ex: feeling hungry, feel heart beating, sensation that you need to use the restroom) (Cleveland Clinic, 2025)
 - Supporting sensory needs through sensory strategies
 - Executive functioning strategies (i.e., daily checklists)
 - Creating supportive home, school, and community environments through suggestions and modifications, including ergonomic advice

Evaluation, Assessments, and Intervention

- When working with a new client, OTs will learn more about the client’s daily functioning and goals through observations and conversations, gathering what is known as the occupational profile.
 - An occupational profile is a “summary of a client’s occupational history and experiences, patterns of daily living, interests, values, needs, and relevant contexts” (AOTA, 2020).
- Pediatric mental health OTs may use a variety of assessments as needed to assess specific skills or areas of functioning. These may be to determine overall development or more specific areas, such as for sensory processing.
- In intervention, pediatric mental health OTs utilize occupations and therapeutic activities to foster wellness and promote management of mental health symptoms in children.
- Pediatric mental health OTs tailor their approach to each client and family and remain aware of cultural values and other important values to the families they serve to provide inclusive care.

PEO Model: Person, Environment, Occupation

- The PEO Model is a model of practice used in OT that emphasizes a transactional relationship between person, environment, and occupation which affects occupational performance.
- The PEO model may be a useful model for pediatric mental health OTs to refer to as they begin treatment with a client, plan treatment, and create plans for discharge from ot services

(Woodroffe, 2022)

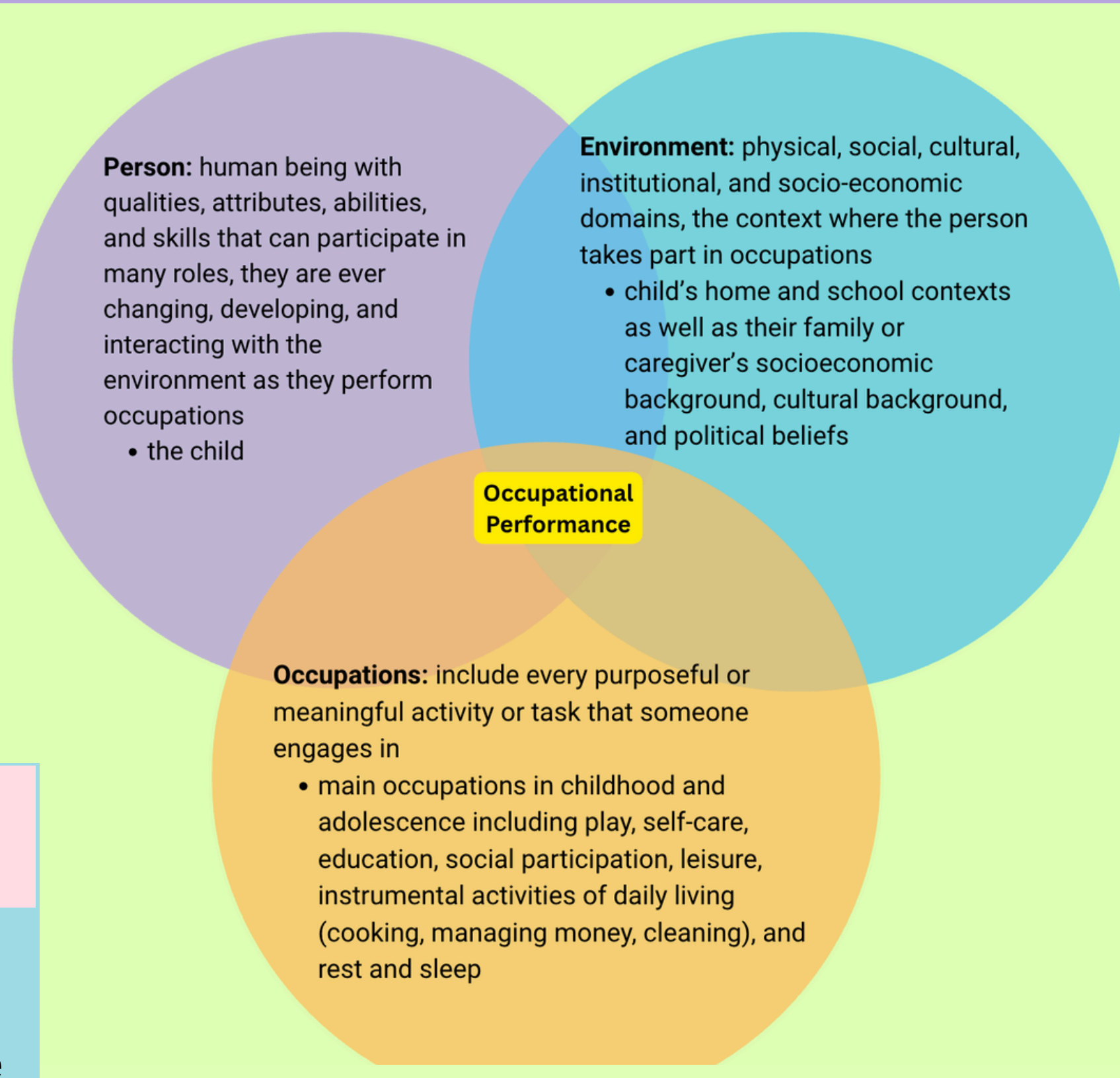
OCCUPATIONAL THERAPY IN PEDIATRIC MENTAL HEALTH

Prepared by Maya Ortega, OTS and Bella Schaerf, OTS

PEO Model: Person, Environment, Occupation

- Occupational Performance: how well an individual can perform an occupation in the environment
 - This is a result of the transaction between the person, environment, and occupation
 - how well children perform in their occupations throughout various environments such as going to school, doing self-care tasks, and being around other children

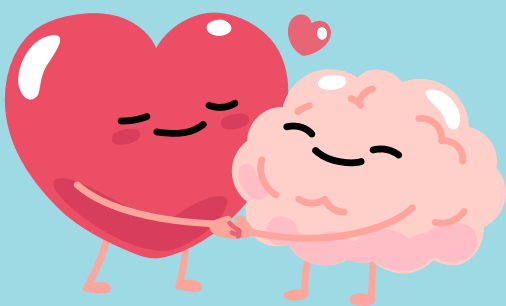
(Woodroffe, 2022)



Conditions Treated

Pediatric mental health occupational therapy (OT) supports children with various diagnoses. Some examples include, but are not limited to:

- Anxiety and Depression: OT helps children develop coping strategies, manage emotional overwhelm, and regulate their sensory experiences.
- Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD): Interventions may target social skills, sensory integration, emotional regulation, and daily living skills.
- Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD): OT supports improvements in focus, organization, and self-regulation.
- Trauma and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD): OT provides a safe, structured environment where children can build trust, emotional safety, and effective coping mechanisms.
- Conduct Disorder and Oppositional Defiant Disorder (ODD): OT focuses on enhancing emotional regulation, improving impulse control, and promoting positive social interactions.



(OTAC, 2021; OTAC, 2009)

Benefits of OT in this Practice Area

Improved Emotional Regulation

- OT helps children recognize, identify, and manage their emotional responses to stress, anxiety, and everyday challenges.
- Through purposeful activities and targeted interventions, children learn to maintain positive emotional states and regulate both conscious and unconscious emotions.
- Developing emotional regulation supports success in various environments, including home, school, and social settings.

Building Structured Daily Routines

- OT helps children, especially those with anxiety, depression, or other mental health conditions, create meaningful and manageable daily routines.
- These routines offer a sense of control, stability, and predictability—essential for emotional and mental well-being.

Promoting Engagement in Meaningful Activities

- A central focus of OT is encouraging participation in activities that bring joy, purpose, and a sense of achievement.
- These may include hobbies, creative outlets, physical activity, or social play.
- OTs also support healthy lifestyle habits by helping integrate proper nutrition, movement, and self-care into daily routines.

(Planche, n.d.; Schaaf, et al., 2018)

OCCUPATIONAL THERAPY IN PEDIATRIC MENTAL HEALTH

Prepared by Maya Ortega, OTS and Bella Schaerf, OTS

Collaboration with Other Professionals

Interdisciplinary Collaboration

- Occupational therapy practitioners play a vital role in working alongside psychologists, psychiatrists, social workers, teachers, and medical specialists to support children with anxiety and related disorders.
- This collaborative approach ensures a comprehensive, individualized care plan that addresses both mental and physical health needs.

Holistic, Evidence-Based Interventions

- OT interventions may incorporate cognitive-behavioral strategies, child-centered and occupation-based play, yoga, and music.
- These approaches help improve functional performance, encourage participation, support emotional regulation, and foster meaningful peer relationships (Handojo et al., 2017).

Coordination Across Settings

- OTs ensure that therapeutic strategies are consistent and effective across environments, including home, school, and clinical settings.
- Regular communication with families, teachers, and other professionals supports a cohesive and supportive care experience for the child.

Support for Medically Complex Cases

- Pediatric OTs collaborate with specialists in fields such as oncology, neurology, gastroenterology, and endocrinology to deliver integrated care for children with both mental health challenges and complex medical conditions.

(Planche, n.d.)

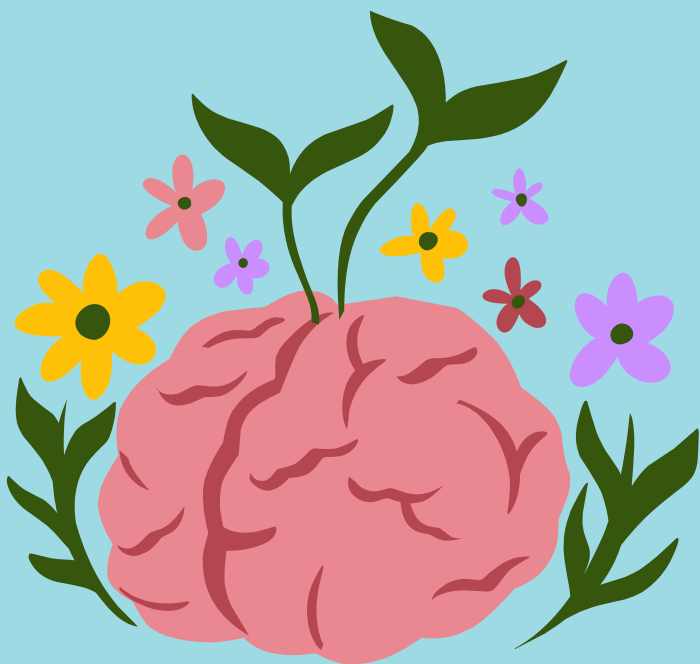
Resources and Support

Parent Support Groups

- Fiesta Educativa “Supporting the families of individuals with disabilities, strengthens the bonds that connect us, helping ensure each individual's well-being and success, regardless of ability”
- UCLA Parenting Program for Children and Adolescents” The UCLA Parenting Program is an evidence-based, behavioral, parent training program that teaches parents skills to effectively manage difficult child and adolescent behavior. Our goal is to increase cooperation and improve communication between parent and child.”

Resources for Youth and Families

- Youth Mental Health Resources Hub—is a comprehensive digital platform developed by the California Health and Human Services Agency (CHHS) to support the mental health and well-being of youth, young adults, and families across California.



References

American Occupational Therapy Association (AOTA). (2020). Occupational Therapy Practice Framework: Domain and Process (4th ed). American Journal of Occupational Therapy, 74 (Suppl. 2), 7412410010. <https://doi.org/10.5014/ajot.2020.74S200>

Cleveland Clinic. (2025). Interoception. <https://my.clevelandclinic.org/health/articles/interoception>

Mandich, A. and Rodger, S. A. (2006). Doing, being and becoming: Their importance to children. Occupational Therapy with Children: Understanding Children's Occupations and Enabling Participation. Edited by S. Rodger and J. Ziviani. Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publisher Ltd.115-135.

Nakao, M., Shiotsuki, K., & Sugaya, N. (2021). Cognitive-behavioral therapy for management of mental health and stress-related disorders: Recent advances in techniques and technologies. BioPsychoSocial medicine, 15(1), 16. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s13030-021-00219-w>

Nina Handojo, Christine Hsu-Nazzal, Nadia Kabbani, Yvonne Swinth, George Tomlin, Kristen Brubaker; Intervention Strategies for Anxiety in Children: A Summary of the Evidence. Am J Occup Ther July 2017, Vol. 71(4_Supplement_1), 7111520273p1. doi: <https://doi.org/10.5014/ajot.2017.71S1-PO1052>

Occupational Therapy Association of California (OTAC). (2021). OT & Mental Health.

Occupational Therapy Association of California (OTAC). (2009). Occupational Therapy Association of California Fact Sheet OT and Community Mental Health.

Planche, E. (n.d.). Occupational Therapist’s Role in Children and Adolescent Mental Health.

Schaaf, R. C., Dumont, R. L., Arbesman, M., & May-Benson, T. A. (2018). Efficacy of Occupational Therapy Using Ayres Sensory Integration®: A Systematic Review. The American journal of occupational therapy : official publication of the American Occupational Therapy Association, 72(1), 7201190010p1–7201190010p10. <https://doi.org/10.5014/ajot.2018.028431>

Woodroffe, N. (2022). Person-Environment-Occupation Model. <https://peomodel.com/>

Yogman, M., Garner, A., Hutchinson, J., Hirsh-Pasek, K., Golinkoff, R. M.; Committee on Psychosocial Aspects of Child and Family Health, Council on Communications and Media. (2018). The power of play: A pediatric role in enhancing development in young children. Pediatrics, 142, e20182058. <https://doi.org/10.1542/peds.2018-2058>