

Building brighter futures

How occupational therapists support caregivers to contribute to the well-being and occupational engagement of their children.

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Occupational therapists (OTs) are often asked “What is it that you do?” The answer is simple. At their core, occupational therapists focus on helping people do both the ordinary and extraordinary things that are important for daily life. We call these things our occupations. For children, occupations include growing and becoming independent, learning, playing, and socialising. For caregivers, a central occupation is raising and supporting their children. Because caregivers play such an important role within the family system, OTs work alongside them to support their well-being, and the well-being of their children. This is done by encouraging their engagement in everyday occupations. Practically, OTs empower caregivers to help their children build skills and confidence; establish healthy routines and participate fully in life.

CAREGIVER CREATING NURTURING ENVIRONMENTS

Early experiences shape how children learn and play. For children to flourish, they must feel safe in their environment. A nurturing environment extends beyond providing food and shelter; it encompasses love, guidance, opportunities for growth, a sense of security, and the freedom to express oneself. There are a number of situations where there is a disconnect between what children may need to or want to do. One example is caring for children who have barriers to learning, disabilities and/or emotional challenges. The intense nature of caring for children with challenges can be overwhelming and may be accompanied with feelings of uncertainty and stress, particularly when there is limited support or possible stigma and judgement from one’s community.

The pressure of trying to support the child without adequate guidance can significantly affect not only the caregiver’s well-being but also the well-being of the child and the overall family dynamics. It is at this juncture that OTs partner with caregivers to offer them the support and guidance they may need.

HOW OCCUPATIONAL THERAPISTS SUPPORT CHILDREN AND THEIR CAREGIVERS

Occupational therapist-caregiver partnerships can focus on:

- Helping children become independent in their self-care activities (dressing, eating, and toileting) by guiding caregivers to break down tasks, create visual schedules, or look for alternative ways for the child to successfully master these activities when their existing skills limit them from doing so.
- Guiding caregivers to create and promote outdoor and indoor play opportunities. Play is the main occupation of childhood. OTs advocate for children to be able to play, not only for developing their skills, but also to give them the freedom to play for the sake of playing. To this end, play-focused OT interventions include supporting caregivers to advocate for changes to home, school, or community environments to enable and encourage participation in play.
- Putting in place routines and approaches that encourage children to participate in their occupations to the best of their ability, and in a way that aligns to their unique disposition and way of being. OTs support caregivers to focus on their children as unique human beings whose perceived challenges can, in fact, be seen to be assets.

- Educating caregivers on child development, sensory regulation, behaviour strategies, and play-based learning, and guiding them to develop practical strategies to help their child thrive. For example, OTs may suggest that a child who is struggling to learn to write his or her name, practice doing this outside in the sand. The movement gained in this activity helps the child develop the ability to form letters on paper.
- Promoting caregiver well-being by validating the challenges they face, supporting them in recognising and managing their own needs, and connecting them with community resources and support networks helps ensure they are equipped to provide the best possible care for their children. Caregiver support groups exist, and OTs help connect caregivers with such groups, which they themselves may facilitate.
- Caring for children is one of the most important and often most challenging roles in life. The daily actions of caregivers influence the physical, emotional, social and spiritual well-being of the children in our care. In South Africa, caregivers of children can include a range of people, such as grandparents, aunts, uncles, and even siblings. OTs are intentional in building meaningful connections with all caregivers to understand the concerns they may have about their children. They work with caregivers to develop practical ways to address these concerns. Throughout this process, OTs are attuned to the ways in which caregivers wish to be supported, and are respectful of the socio-cultural values which may shape their choices in how they wish their children to participate in their daily occupations, including play. □