

Nature-Based Occupational Therapy: Day Group Activities for At-Risk Children & Adolescents



Nature-Based OT?

Maine has abundant, unique, natural features that are rich with OT potential. Nature-based OT utilizes benefits of nature settings within the scope of Occupational Therapy practice. Nature settings are defined as, "outdoor environments that retain their uncultivated features and have been relatively untouched by human development, including buildings (Figueroa, 2020)."

Theory

- ConTiGO Approach (Connection and Transformation in the Great Outdoors)
 - Based on Occupational Adaption (OA) Model
 - Addresses motor coordination, mental health, self-regulation, and/or social skills

Concept

Occupational therapy practitioners (OTPs), with the help of other volunteering adults, lead full-day, nature-based activity groups, focusing on group and individual goals.

Educational Level/Skills

OTPs leading nature-based group interventions may consider Wilderness First Responder (WFR) and Lifeguard certifications.

Therapeutic Benefits of Nature

- Increases in attention
- Decreases in depression and aggression
- Improvements in physical activity, academic performance, and social and cognitive development
- Engaging, motivating, active participation opportunities for graded and responsive multi-sensory input (AOTA, 2019 & Figueroa, 2020)

Supervision

Occupational therapy assistants with demonstrated service competency can partner with occupational therapists practicing in:

- Schools
- Out-patient clinics
- Welfare agencies
- Non-profit organizations

Reimbursement/Funding

- Volunteer OTP(s)
- Community donations
- Community volunteers
 - Time
 - Location
 - Expertise
 - Activity equipment

OT Goals

- Play & leisure exploration and participation
- Fine and gross motor skills
- Social-emotional skills
- Attention, problem-solving, decision-making, self-esteem, and overall mental health.
- Sensory modulation, sensory discrimination, praxis, adaptive behaviors, and sensory-seeking strategies (AOTA, 2019; Ashcroft, et al.; Figueroa, 2020)



Why at-risk Children and Adolescents?

Children who have experienced early adversity (EA) face various challenges such as sensory discrimination, praxis, sensory modulation, and insecure attachments. EA effects the brain, behavior, and development of occupational performance in pre-school children. As well,

Adverse childhood experiences (ACE) increase the child's risk of developing anxiety, depression, heart disease, and substance abuse disorder in adulthood. OTs can screen for EA, and incorporate sensory integration (SI) and trauma informed care into interventions.

Foster Care

Children and adolescents experiencing foster care are important to consider for OT intervention. 650,000 children experience ACE trauma by entering the foster care system per year. Caregivers of these children were unable to provide basic living or health needs for the child, and the child may have experienced caregiver abuse, neglect, or abandonment.

Changes in school, community, worship, and daycare environments disrupt daily living opportunities of childhood. Multiple or even single foster placements may impact cognition, social skills, self-regulation, and emotional and physical well-being.

(Ashcroft, et al., 2017)



Resources

- American Occupational Therapy Association (AOTA). (2019). Children and Youth 5–21 Years [PDF]. American Occupational Therapy Association, Inc. Retrieved from https://www.aota.org/-/media/Corporate/Files/Secure/Practice/CCL/CY5-21/CY521_MH_MiniCAT_Outdoor.pdf
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- Dankiw KA, Tsiros MD, Baldock KL, Kumar S. (2020). The Impacts of Unstructured Nature Play on Health in Early Childhood Development: A Systematic Review. PLoS ONE 15(2): e0229006. Retrieved <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0229006>
- Figueroa, L. P. (2020). Nature-based Occupational Therapy for Children with Developmental Disabilities. SIS Quarterly Practice Connections, 5(3), 2–5. Retrieved from <https://www.aota.org/Publications-News/SISQuarterly/children-youth-practice-connections/DDSIS-8-20.aspx>