

Learning Through Play



The act of playing is an important tool that influences a child's life. The primary goals of childhood are to grow, learn, and play. It is often through play that children learn to make sense of the world around them. It is a child's "job" or "occupation" to play to develop physical coordination, emotional maturity, social skills to interact with other children, and self-confidence to try new experiences and explore new environments.

Occupational therapists have expertise in evaluating children's neurological, muscular, and emotional development; and determining the effects of infant and childhood illness on growth and development.

What can an occupational therapist do?

- **Evaluate** a child's motor (movement), cognitive (thinking, reasoning), social-emotional, and behavioral development.
- **Recommend** toys and play activities that promote healthy development and provide stimulation to the child.
- **Intervene** when needed to promote development and skills for living.

What can parents and families do?

- Encourage **exploratory play** by using balls, sand and water toys, slides, swings, finger paints, and magnets. During exploratory play, children use their senses as they explore, discover, examine, and organize their activities.
- Try **manipulative play** by asking the child to perform a task, such as stacking cereal boxes, slipping coins into a piggy bank, or playing with a deck of

cards. Handling items such as puzzles, pegboards, beads, and lacing cards test the child's eye and hand coordination and dexterity.

- Suggest **imaginative** or **symbolic play** that includes role-playing, playing with dolls and stuffed animals, toy furniture, and telephones. This type of pretend play encourages good social skills and a positive self-image.
- **Choose** toys that are appropriate for the child's age. They do not have to be expensive or complicated to be beneficial to the child. Common objects, such as pots and pans, empty boxes, spools of thread, shoelaces, and wooden spoons can stimulate activity. The best toys require active participation.
- **Remember** when choosing a toy to consider whether a child must be supervised while playing with it. Toys should not have small parts that break easily or can be swallowed.

Need more information?

A child's inability to play well could indicate another problem, such as a learning disability or behavioral problem. If you would like to consult an occupational therapist, your physician, other health professionals, and your school district's director of special education may have information on how you can access an occupational therapist in your area.

Occupational therapists and occupational therapy assistants are trained in helping children with a broad range of issues in addition to the development of play skills, such as self-care and social skills, and proper computer and backpack use.