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A Critical Review of the Evidence Base for Occupational Therapy Mental Health Practice for Children and Young People

Sharon Cheek, Katie Grainge, Laura Kirk, Alison Laver-Fawcett, Karen Wilson

Occupational Therapy Programme, Faculty of Health and Life Sciences, York St John University, United Kingdom

Why was this review conducted?

The World Federation of Occupational Therapists (WFOT) is developing a Master Plan for Mental Health

- to more clearly outline and promote the role of occupational therapy in mental health services
- to define specific educational components to better support occupational therapy practice in mental health settings (Ceramidas et al., 2012)

This review focuses on mental health practice for children and young people, as the onset of mental illness commonly occurs in adolescence.

AIMS and OBJECTIVES

To review the evidence base to clarify the role and effectiveness of occupational therapy in the promotion of mental health and in prevention and recovery from mental illness for children, adolescents and young adults (aged 0-25 years)

1. Conduct a systematised literature search to identify relevant literature relating to occupational therapy practice in mental health for children and young people (CYP)
2. Analyse and critically appraise literature that met the inclusion criteria
3. Undertake a thematic analysis of the literature appraised
4. Make recommendations for future practice and research

METHODOLOGY

1. Literature Search

- DATABASES: Cochrane library of systematic reviews, MEDLINE, AMED, PsychINFO, Child and Adolescent Development Studies and OTSeeker databases
- TIME FRAME: Articles from 2011-2015 were selected to update a previous WFOT literature search from 2004-2012 (Ceramidas et al., 2012; Reed, 2012)
- SEARCH TERMS: child* OR adolescen* OR youth OR " young pe*" OR teen* AND "mental" OR *psych* OR well* OR depression OR anxiety AND intervention OR outcome OR role OR prevent* OR recover* OR promot* OR treat* AND "occupation* therap*" NOT psychometric

2. Critical Appraisal

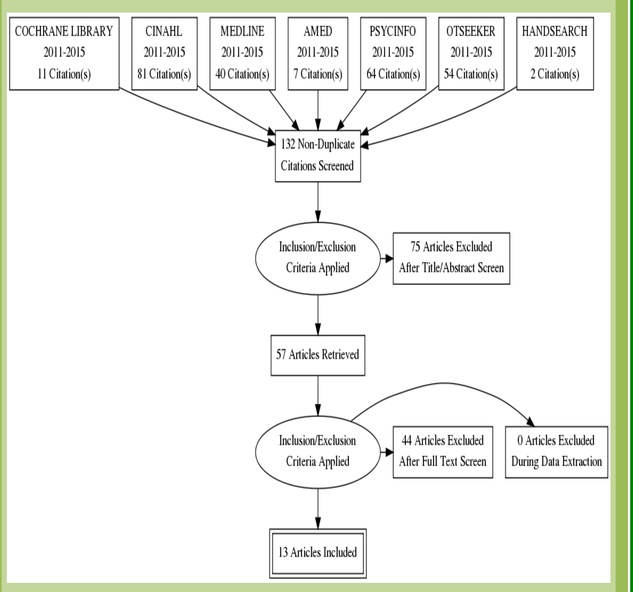
- The McGill Mixed Methods Appraisal Tool (MMAT), was used (Pluye et al., 2011) to enable qualitative, quantitative and mixed methods studies to be critically appraised.

3. Thematic Analysis

- An inductive approach was taken to explore and interpret themes that emerged from the selected articles (Thomas and Harden, 2008).

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

Figure 1. **PRISMA diagram**



1. Literature Search

- 13 articles met the inclusion criteria
- 5 literature reviews, 4 quantitative, 3 qualitative studies and a PhD thesis (mixed methods).

2. Critical Appraisal

- Diversity of studies (summarised in Table 2) precluded meta-analysis
- Highest quality of evidence was found from other disciplines to support interventions which **COULD** be done by occupational therapists[1]
- High quality studies supported interventions targeting development of social skills through play[1,2]

3. Thematic Analysis

- Four themes emerged (Figure 2)
- Analysis of 11 sub-themes revealed many inter-relationships with social factors interwoven throughout

Figure 2. **Themes and Sub-themes**

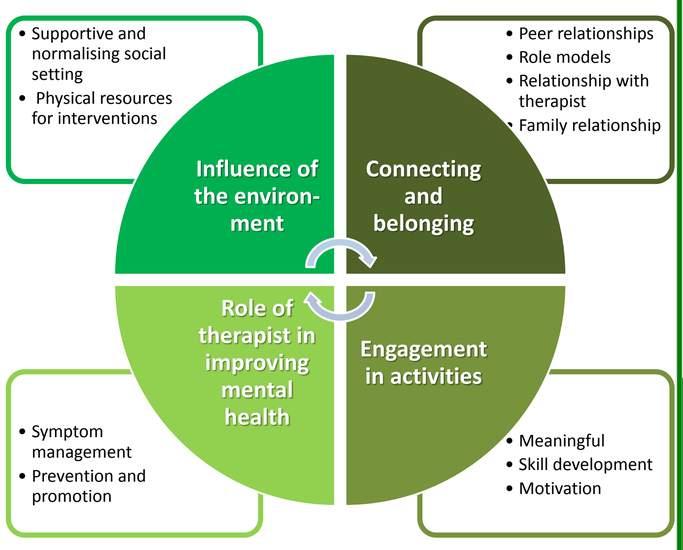


Table 1. **Frequency of themes across Studies***

	Influence of the Environment		Connecting and Belonging				Engagement in activities			Improving mental health	
*	Social	Physical	Role Models	Peers	Professional Relationships	Family	Meaning	Skills	Motivation	Symptom Management	Prevention Promotion
1	X	X	X	X				X		X	X
2	X	X	X	X	X	X		X	X	X	X
3	X		X	X							X
4	X	X		X	X	X		X	X		X
5	X	X	X	X			X	X			X
6							X			X	
7	X	X		X	X		X	X	X	X	
8	X	X	X	X	X			X			
9					X		X			X	
10					X	X		X	X	X	
11								X		X	
12	X	X				X		X		X	
13	X	X		X	X		X	X	X	X	

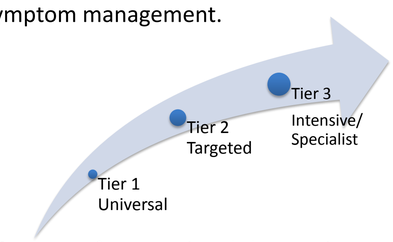
Skill development was the most frequent sub-theme identified with complex multi-directional interactions of **social factors**. Peer relationships are identified both as a **source** of supportive social environments, and an **outcome** of skill development through participation in activities[4].

Table 2. **Summary of Articles Appraised**

	Author, year	Aims	Methodology	Location of study	Sample type/size	Key findings	Quality rating
1	Arbesman et al. (2013)	To systematically review the literature on the effectiveness of activity-based interventions for mental health promotion, prevention, and intervention with children and youth.	Systematic review	United States	124 Articles covering ages 3-21 years	A strength-based and activity-based approach can be used with children and youth in a wide range of environments. School-based stress management programs have been shown to reduce stress and improve coping skills in children. There is strong evidence supporting the effectiveness of social skills programs for children requiring services at intensive level. Social skills programs are effective in improving social behaviours for children and adolescents with a diagnosed mental illness or serious behaviour disorder.	1 CASP
2	Case-Smith (2013)	To investigate the evidence for the effectiveness of interventions used by occupational therapy practitioners to promote social-emotional development of children with or at risk for disabilities aged birth to 5 years.	Systematic review	United States	23 Articles covering ages 0-5 years	Occupational therapists can use a range of interventions to effectively promote social-emotional development in young children with or at risk of disabilities. They can also promote bonding and positive parent-child interaction with infants aby coaching parents to use touch-based interventions to promote joint attention. Preschool children with disabilities can develop social competence through peer-mediated strategies and direct instruction.	1 CASP
3	Chen et al. (2015)	To identify critical domains and develop a program model of contact-based interventions for anti-stigma education. Contributing to the development of instruments that can define and accurately measure the fidelity program implementation.	Qualitative (Interview and observation)	Canada	18 programme leaders Age 12-18 years	Empowerment and advocacy can be a powerful way to change social structure in schools A student-oriented approach can lead to an important change in the daily lives of students who experience mental health issues.	2 MMAT
4	Fette (2011)	To review literature relating to a strengths based approach to occupational therapy interventions	PhD Thesis Literature review + Focus group	United States	52 Articles Ages 11-14 years.	A strength-based approach can facilitate increased performance for students at risk of school failure.	1 MMAT
5	Hall et al. (2015)	To explore what is known about youth experiences of positive mental health and how the occupation influences the experience.	Critical Review	Australia	11 Articles Ages 12-25 years	Positive mental health is influenced by a diverse range of factors and supportive social environments and meaningful social occupations promote positive mental health	2 CASP
6	Kohn et al. (2012)	To investigate whether attending an occupational therapist under the Better Access to Mental Health (BAMH) initiative influences change in psychological distress of clients.	Quantitative Quasi-experimental	Australia	31 participants Age 12-25years	Participants experienced positive changes in psychological distress after occupational therapy intervention.	3 MMAT
7	Lal et al. (2013)	To examine the role of valued activity engagement in relation to wellbeing based on the narrative accounts of young people who have been diagnosed with psychosis within the past 3 years.	Qualitative Semi structured interview + focus groups	Canada	17 participants Age 18-24 years	Engaging in valued activities provides access to several wellbeing enhancing experiences. There is a link between activity engagement, making meaning and identity work.	1 MMAT
8	Rouse and Hitch (2014)	To provide an overview of the occupations or activity based groups currently described in occupational therapy literature for young people experiencing mental health difficulties.	Narrative Review	Australia	7 Articles Age 13-25 years	Evidence supporting the value of provision of activity-based groups with young people by occupational therapists is limited. Activity-based group interventions for young people may enhance their health by addressing concepts of doing, being, becoming and belonging.	3 CASP
9	Scanlan et al. (2011)	To explore how weekday time use differs between 'unemployed', 'unemployed but in education' and part-time and full-time employed young adults.	Quantitative Questionnaire	Australia	228 participants Age 18-25 years	To effectively provide occupational therapy services to people who are unemployed, a key focus of intervention must be the development of more meaningful patterns of time-use. Support for individual to engage in more individually meaningful, potentially 'work-like' activities may promote better mental health.	3 MMAT
10	Tokolahi et al. (2013)	To evaluate the acceptability and outcomes of an occupation-based group for children with anxiety aged 10-14 years old.	Quantitative Pre-test/Post-test	New Zealand	34 participants Age 10-14 years	The occupational nature of the intervention was acceptable for children aged 10-14 years. The intervention was found to reduce parent-rated symptoms of anxiety and to increase levels of parent-rated and clinician-rated levels of child functioning.	3 MMAT
11	Tokolahi et al. (2014)	To investigate the effectiveness of an 8-week occupational therapy group intervention at reducing symptoms of anxiety and depression and improving self-esteem, participation and wellbeing in children aged 11-13 years.	Quantitative Protocol for cluster-RCT	New Zealand	N/A Age 11-13 years	There is a lack of evidence in for occupational therapy in children's health promotion generally, thus the results would likely be of national and international interest. Results would also contribute to the evidence-base in this field and potentially contribute to investment in these services.	1 MMAT
12	Weaver and Darragh (2015)	To examine the evidence for the effectiveness of yoga interventions as defined by controlled breathing, postures and meditation in reducing anxiety among children and youths.	Systematic review	United States	16 Articles Age 3-18 years	Anxiety disorders are prevalent among children and adolescents, and associated problems can persist into adulthood and affect functioning in daily life. Yoga interventions have shown positive effects in reducing anxiety across a variety of populations.	1 CASP
13	Williams et al. (2013)	To determine why young people with psychosis attended the Street Soccer programme and to explore participants' perspective of their experience.	Qualitative (interviews)	Australia	6 Male Age 18-23 years	Group facilitators should be aware of the importance of the therapeutic use of self when engaging young people living with mental illness in groups. The majority of participants did not enter the group programme with a clear expectation of what they wanted to achieve by attending, but continued to attend because they felt some personal benefit from doing so.	3 MMAT

CONCLUSIONS

This study found evidence supporting occupation-focused interventions at universal, targeted and intensive levels for promotion of mental health and for enhancing wellbeing through symptom management.



The **effectiveness** of occupational therapy interventions supporting mental health is influenced by:

- A positive relationship with the client, i.e. the ability to connect and engage with young people
- A supportive social context enabling access to positive peer relationships and role models
- Participation in play and self-directed activities, enabling mastery of skills to promote acceptance and belonging.

Different **roles** of the occupational therapist include:

- Supporting parenting/care-giving occupations to encourage attachment and relationship building, and modelling of positive social interactions for the younger age-group;
- Enhancing social-emotional development of CYP;
- Advocacy to promote positive self-identity, autonomy and adaptive transitions from adolescence to adulthood.

Recommendations for Future Practice & Research

Key knowledge gap:

- Child and adolescent perspectives on wellbeing.

Priorities for future research:

- Rigorous outcome measures required
- Studies to ensure the voices of adolescents are heard
- Intervention component analysis to characterise key components of occupational therapy interventions
- Inter-disciplinary studies incorporating neuro-psychological and occupation-focused interventions within school/educational settings

Recommendations for practice:

- Interventions enabling mastery of skills through personally valued, self-directed activities in a supportive, normalising environment, promote inclusion, recovery, mental health and wellbeing in CYP.
- Occupation-focused interventions by can be effectively provided by other staff, e.g. following assessment, intervention planning and education from OT.

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