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

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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
- Define specific educational components to better support occupational therapy practice in mental health settings (Ceramiad 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 prevention and recovery from mental illness for children, adolescents and young adults (aged 0-25 years).
- To conduct a systematic literature review to identify relevant literature relating to occupational therapy practice in mental health care for children and young people (CPY).
- To analyse and critically appraise literature that met the inclusion criteria.
- To undertake a thematic analysis of the literature appraised.
- To make recommendations for future practice and research.

1. Literature Search

- 13 articles met the inclusion criteria
- 5 literature reviews, 4 qualitative, 3 qualitative studies and a PhD thesis

2. Critical Appraisal

- Diversity of studies (summarized in Table 2) precluded meta-analysis
- Highest quality of evidence was found from other disciplines to support interventions which could be supported by occupational therapists
- High quality studies supported intervention targeting development of social skills through play

3. Thematic Analysis

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

References for Included Studies


Table 1. Themes of across Studies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Connecting &amp; belonging</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Develop meaningful</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Skill development &amp; motivation</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Influence of the intervention</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Occasional role &amp; interventions</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Symptom management</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent involvement</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
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SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

- The effectiveness of occupational therapy interventions supporting mental health is influenced by:
  - A positive relationship with the client, i.e. the ability to engage and connect with young people
  - A supportive social context enabling access to positive peer relationships and roles
  - 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/caregiving occupations to encourage attachment and relationship building, and modelling of positive social interactions for the younger age groups
  - Enhancing social-emotional development of CPY
  - Advocacy to promote positive self-identity, autonomy and adaptive transitions from adolescence to adulthood

Recommendations for Future Practice & Research

- Interventions enabling mastery of skills through personally valued, self-directed activities in a supportive, normalizing environment
- Occupation-focused interventions by be effectively provided by other staff e.g., following assessment, intervention planning and education from OT.

Key concept: child and adolescent perspectives on wellbeing

Priorities for future research:

- Rigorous outcome measures required
- Studies to explore the views of adolescents are heard
- Intervention component analysis to characterise key components of occupational therapy interventions
- Inter-disciplinary studies incorporating neuro-psychiatric focus-occupation focused understandings within school/educational settings

CONCLUSIONS

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

Figure 1. PRISMA diagram

Figure 2. Themes and Sub-themes

Table 2. Summary of Articles Appraised

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Article</th>
<th>Methodology</th>
<th>Setting</th>
<th>Participants</th>
<th>Findings</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lal et al.</td>
<td>Systematic review</td>
<td>Australia</td>
<td>Young people with psychosis</td>
<td>Development-based and activity-based approach can be successful with children and youth in a wide range of environments, school-based stress management programs have been shown to reduce stress and improve mental health in children. There is strong evidence of the effectiveness of social skills interventions for children requiring services at intensive level. Social skills programs are effective in improving social and emotional competence for children and adolescents, and reducing social and emotional problems, thus improving outcomes for children and adolescents.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tokolahi et al.</td>
<td>Systematic review</td>
<td>Australia</td>
<td>Children with anxiety</td>
<td>Empowerment and advocacy can be powerful ways to change social structures in schools. A student-oriented ecological approach to the role of occupational therapy in promoting positive outcomes for children and adolescents experiencing mental health issues.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rouse and Hitch</td>
<td>Systematic review</td>
<td>Australia</td>
<td>Young people with mental illness</td>
<td>Peer relationships and supportive social environments, and an enabling normalising environment, promote inclusion, recovery, and adaptive transitions from adolescence to adulthood.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nunn and Hitch</td>
<td>Systematic review</td>
<td>Australia</td>
<td>Children with anxiety</td>
<td>Evidence supporting the value of activity based groups young people with anxiety can engage in within a positive peer setting.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Williams et al.</td>
<td>Systematic review</td>
<td>Australia</td>
<td>Children and young people with mental health issues</td>
<td>Summary of findings: (1) engagement in valued activities has many inter-relationships with social factors, (2) meaningful social occupations promote positive mental health, (3) meaningful social occupations promote positive mental health.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Methodology: Systematic review, Cochrane Library of Systemic Reviews, MEDLINE | Setting: Australia, Canada, and New Zealand | Participants: Young people with mental health issues, children and young people with anxiety | Findings: Evidence supporting the value of activity based groups young people with anxiety can engage in within a positive peer setting. Meaningful social occupations promote positive mental health.