Working Together: A Family Guide to Occupational Therapy in Schools

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About this Resource

Families often have questions about how occupational therapy works in schools. This resource is designed to provide clear, easy-to-understand answers to common questions families and caregivers may have. It explains what occupational therapy is, how it can support your child's learning and participation at school, and what you can expect from the process along the way. You can read the whole document or simply look up the questions that matter the most to you.

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Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs)

1. What is occupational therapy and what does an occupational therapist (OT) do?

Occupational therapy helps people take part in everyday activities that are important in daily life, which for children, can include things like dressing, eating, playing, or school activities.

Occupational therapists (OTs) are regulated health care professionals who help children participate fully and safely in school life by:

- Creating safer environments, activities, and routines.
- Assisting with washroom routines, organizing belongings, and dressing for outdoor play.
- Helping children manage emotions, behaviours, and energy levels.
- Supporting classroom tasks, transitions, social interactions, play, and events.
- Encouraging positive peer relationships and involvement in school activities.

Occupational therapy assistants (OTAs) are trained professionals who support this work under the supervision of the OT.

2. What are school-based occupational therapy services?

School-based occupational therapy services are provided to help children participate throughout the school day in academic, self-care, social, and play activities. The occupational therapist works with children, educators, and families to develop strategies and design environments to support children's development and participation at school.

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3. What are School-Based Rehabilitation Services (SBRS) and how does occupational therapy fit into these?

School-Based Rehabilitation Services (SBRS) are services for children provided in publicly funded schools by occupational therapists (OTs), speech-language pathologists (SLPs), and physiotherapists (PTs). Occupational therapy is one part of SBRS, and OTs focus on helping students participate as fully as possible at school.

Together, SBRS services help students to be more successful at school, at home, and in their communities.

4. How are occupational therapy services delivered in Ontario schools?

In Ontario, school-based occupational therapy services are usually provided through Children's Treatment Centres (CTCs) as part of School-Based Rehabilitation Services (SBRS). These centres employ occupational therapists (OTs) and therapy assistants who work in schools to support children and collaborate with school staff.

Some school boards employ their own OTs.

To learn more about the occupational therapy services at your child's school, contact the school office or the OT.

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5. What is the difference between occupational therapy services provided in schools and occupational therapy services provided in the community?

Community-based occupational therapy focuses on helping children take part in everyday activities at home and in the community.

- **Focus:** daily routines (e.g., getting dressed, brushing teeth), home tasks, leisure and community activities.
- **Where it happens**: in community locations or in the child's home.
- **Who is involved:** therapists work directly with families and share strategies they can use in daily life.

School-based occupational therapy focuses on helping children participate in school routines and learning activities.

- **Focus**: classroom tasks, school participation, organization, self-regulation, and school-related self-care.
- **Where it happens:** at school.
- **Who is involved:** therapists collaborate with teachers and other school staff (with family consent) and with families to support the child during the school day.

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6. How do families learn about the occupational therapy services that are being offered at the school?

If a child is already attending school, families can reach out to their child's teacher or the school office to inquire about the occupational therapy services offered in their child's school.

If a child has not started school yet, families can contact the school their child will be attending to learn more about what occupational therapy services are offered in the school. Families can also visit the website of their local Children's Treatment Centre (CTC), which may include a description of the School-Based Rehabilitation Services (SBRS).

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7. If my child has been receiving occupational therapy services prior to starting school, what will happen to my child's existing occupational therapy services when they start school?

If your child has been receiving occupational therapy before starting school, these services may have been provided by your local Children's Treatment Centre (CTC). When your child starts school, the occupational therapist (OT) or agency that provided services before school entry will work with the school to determine what occupational therapy services your child may receive and how those services will be delivered.

- **Who provides services:**
    - In many areas, the same CTC continues to provide occupational therapy once your child starts school.
    - In some regions, school-based occupational therapy may be provided by OTs employed directly by the school board.
- **What may change:**
    - Your child may receive school-based occupational therapy, community-based occupational therapy, or a combination, depending on their needs and where you live.
    - In some areas, the same OT may support your child in both settings; in other areas, different OTs may be involved.
- **What families can do:**
    - If you have questions, contact the OT who previously supported your child or contact the school your child will be attending.
    - Because services vary across Ontario, families should confirm whether their child's school provides occupational therapy services directly, receives them through a CTC, or has access to supports in another way.

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8. Whose responsibility is it to inform families about school-based occupational therapy services?

Informing families about school-based occupational therapy services is a shared responsibility, and the process depends on the type of service provided. At tier 1, when an occupational therapist (OT) is working in a classroom or with a teacher, communication is typically a joint effort between the OT and school administration. Families usually receive a letter explaining that an OT may be in their child's classroom, the OT's role, and what services they may provide.

The OT ensures this information is shared through school communication channels (e.g., notices sent home or emails). At tiers 2 or 3, if the OT suggests working with a child individually or in a small group, families can expect direct contact from the OT to explain the services and obtain consent before any services are provided.

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9. What are tiered, school-based occupational therapy services and what do they look like?

Tiered school-based occupational therapy services use a multi-level approach to help all children participate in school. Tiered service models provide support at three levels:

- **Tier 1** focuses on universal strategies that can help all children. It can include making small changes to the classroom environment, so it works better for everyone and/or working with the teacher to share practical tips and tools to support all children's learning and participation.

- **Tier 2** provides extra help for children who need a little more support than what is offered at Tier 1. It might include short-term sessions for individuals or small groups of children to work skill development or to try different tools or strategies to support participation with activities such as writing, organization, self-regulation, dressing, play, etc.

- **Tier 3** offers individualized support for children with more complex needs. This may include one-on-one sessions with strategies tailored specifically for the child, and/or access to specialized tools or technology that make learning and participation easier.

By providing services at different tiers, and in children's learning environments, occupational therapists can address a diverse range of needs and help all children succeed, engage, and participate more fully in school life, while promoting an inclusive culture where occupational therapy is a natural part of learning.

One example of a tiered service model is Partnering for Change (see question #12).

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10. How do I know if my child's school is using a tiered model of occupational therapy service?

The best place to start is by reaching out directly to your child's school. You can contact the school office and ask whether a tiered model of occupational therapy service is used, and how occupational therapy support is organized within the school. They may refer you to the Special Education team for more detailed information.

You can also check the website of your local Children's Treatment Centre (CTC) where many CTCs describe the service models used in partnership with schools in their region. To find the name of your local CTC you may refer to this webpage from the Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services. If the information isn't available online, you can contact the CTC directly to ask whether a tiered model is in place and what it looks like for your child's school.

Because service delivery can vary between school boards (and even between individual schools) reaching out to the school and/or the CTC are the most reliable ways to learn about the model being used.

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11. How do I know what tier of service my child is receiving?

You can tell what tier of service your child is receiving by the type of communication you receive:

- **For Tier 1**, all families receive a letter explaining the occupational therapist's (OT's) role in the classroom. Your child's teacher may also share information about classroom-based supports or mention that the OT is working with them on strategies to support all children.

- **For Tiers 2 and 3**, the OT will contact you directly to explain why your child is being considered for additional support and what services might look like for your child. Services will not begin until your consent is obtained.

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12. What is Partnering for Change (P4C)?

Partnering for Change (P4C) is a model for delivering tiered school-based occupational therapy services that was developed by researchers from the CanChild Centre for Childhood-Onset Disability Research at McMaster University.

P4C is a flexible, needs-based model that promotes collaboration among therapists, teachers and other school staff, and families. Occupational therapists (OTs) have a predictable schedule and a consistent presence in the school and work in classrooms alongside teachers, to provide educationally relevant strategies in real-time. Children can access services at any of the three tiers, (or levels of support) according to need. This partnership helps create inclusive learning environments that support the engagement and participation of all children.

Researchers have studied P4C extensively, and it is recognized as a proven approach that enhances children's participation and inclusion. For more information about P4C, please visit: www.p4cguide.com.

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13. Are tiered occupational therapy services offered at the secondary school level?

Occupational therapy services are available in both elementary and secondary schools through School-Based Rehabilitation Services (SBRS), and in some areas through the school board. However, the *tiered model*, where occupational therapists (OTs) provide universal, targeted, and individualized support, is rarely used in secondary schools.

At the secondary level, occupational therapy support is typically provided on an individual basis, rather than through universal or school-wide approaches. Currently, resources and research on tiered approaches for youth in secondary schools are limited.

To learn more about the occupational therapy services offered at your child's school, contact the school office or the OT.

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14. If I'm a parent who is concerned about my child's skills (related to occupational therapy), who do I reach out to?

If you have concerns about your child's motor skills, self-care skills, sensory needs, or other areas related to occupational therapy, the best place to start is with your child's teacher or the school office. They can discuss your concerns and connect you with the school's occupational therapist or the School-Based Rehabilitation Services (SBRS) provider for your area, if needed.

If you're unsure where to begin, you can also speak directly with the school's Special Education team.

15. Can I contact the school occupational therapist (OT) directly if needed?

Yes. If you have concerns about your child, such as their ability to participate in daily school activities, or if you think they might benefit from occupational therapy, you can contact the school OT. Their contact information may have been shared with you in a letter, if not, contact your child's teacher or the school office for details.

If you have more general concerns about how your child is doing in school, start by having a conversation with your child's teacher. They can share their perspective and guide you to the next steps, (if needed), which may include connecting with the OT or other supports.

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16. If the school reaches out to me about my child needing occupational therapy, what are the next steps?

If the school has contacted you about the need for occupational therapy they will explain what they've noticed and why they think occupational therapy may be helpful. With your consent, the school will involve an occupational therapist who can learn more about your child's strengths and needs and suggest strategies and/or supports.

The school team will keep you informed and let you know how occupational therapy may help your child at school.

17. How do I find out more about the *specific* occupational therapy services that my child is receiving at the school?

If you want to know more about the specific occupational therapy services your child is receiving, the best option is to contact the occupational therapist (OT) directly. The OT can best describe the services they are providing and answer your questions.

If you do not have the OT's contact information, reach out to your child's teacher or the school office. They can help connect you with the OT.

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18. If my child needs tools or equipment at school, who pays for them?

Smaller items, like pencil grips, fidgets, or noise-cancelling headphones, may be purchased through the school's special education budget. Many schools already have some universal tools available, so your child may be able to use what's on hand. If not, the school team will work together to find solutions.

For specialized, high-cost items (e.g., adaptive seating or technology), schools can apply for funding through the Ontario Ministry of Education's Special Equipment Amount/Allocation (SEA). An occupational therapist (OT) may recommend these items if they're essential for your child's learning and/or included in their Individual Education Plan (IEP). The OT at your child's school will be able to advise and assist with obtaining SEA funding

It may also be appropriate for some children to bring their own equipment, tools, or resources from home, to use at school (such as a customized augmentative and alternative communication device).

In general, the education system is responsible for providing necessary tools and equipment for learning and participation at school, but availability can vary. If you're unsure, ask your child's OT or the school's Special Education Resource Teacher what is already in place and what can be requested.

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19. What options are available if my child needs more support?

Start with the school

Begin by discussing your child's needs with the school occupational therapist (OT) and teachers. Share your observations and explain where you feel your child needs more help. Together, you can determine the best way to support your child and where that support can happen. The school team may:

- suggest next steps.
- provide resources to support your child.
- involve an occupational therapy assistant or other school staff who can offer additional guidance and support.

Explore options beyond the school

If more help is needed beyond what the school can provide, families can explore other options, such as:

- accessing additional services and supports through a Children's Treatment Centre (CTC).
- hiring a private OT (if financially feasible).
- engaging in after-school and/or programs and/or community recreation opportunities that promote participation and skill-building.

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20. How can families be involved in their child's school-based occupational therapy services?

Families know their child best, and their insights can help the occupational therapist (OT) understand the child's strengths, interests, and needs. If you'd like to be involved, here are some ways you might participate:

- **Share what you know:** Let the OT know about your child's preferences, routines, and any strategies that work well at home.
- **Ask questions or request ideas:** You can ask the OT for suggestions or simple activities that fit into your daily routines to support what your child is learning at school.
- **Observe or meet in person:** If possible, you might ask to observe a session or meet the OT at school to talk about your child's progress and goals.
- **Choose communication that works for you:** Let the OT know the best way to reach you (email, phone, notes) and what times work best. Keep in mind that privacy rules may limit what can be shared by voicemail or email.

Your involvement is always your choice. Even small conversations can help the OT create strategies that fit your child's needs at school and at home.

We hope this FAQ helps you feel more informed and confident about school-based occupational therapy services. You are an important partner in your child's success, and your questions matter. Below, there are additional links and resources to explore if you would like to learn more about specific topics.

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Additional Resources

For more information, please refer to the following resources:

- CanChild Centre for Childhood-Onset Disability Research
  - https://canchild.ca/
- Partnering for Change (P4C) Tiered OT Service Model
  - https://www.p4cguide.com
- School-Based Rehabilitation Services Guidelines in Ontario
  - https://www.ontario.ca/document/mccss-service-objectives-children-special-needs/services-delivered-school-based
- Children's Treatment Centre (CTC) Services by Region
  - https://www.ontario.ca/page/childrens-rehabilitation-services#section-4
  - *For specific Children's Treatment Centre (CTC) websites, please refer to the link above, which provides direct links to all CTCs across Ontario.

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