

Guiding OT Student Support in Schools

Occupational Therapy (OT) in schools focuses on helping students participate in everyday school activities by targeting skills such as self-regulation, executive functioning, fine motor, visual perception, and self-care ([click here](#) to learn more about each area of support). OT is here to work alongside educators to help all students succeed in meaningful school tasks.

The level of OT involvement is based on **Functional Impact** and **Safety & Accessibility** ([click here](#) for more details). Please note, all students start at Tier 1 unless they require support for **Safety & Accessibility** needs, which may place them at Tier 2 or Tier 3.

Please see the following pages for more information on [Tier 1](#), [Tier 2](#), and [Tier 3](#) levels of support. A summary of the information can be found in the table below:

Tier	Who	Support Level	OT Involvement
Tier 1	All students	Universal strategies	No direct service; classroom-based supports
Tier 2	Some students	Targeted strategies	Limited direct OT time; consult and check-ins
Tier 3	Few students	Complex needs support	Ongoing collaboration and direct OT service

Note: If you're not sure what level of support a student may need, connect with your school's OT or Learning Support team. We are happy to help assess and guide next steps. Please note, the tiered model is flexible and responsive - students can move between tiers as their needs change, and support is adjusted based on ongoing observation and collaboration with the learning team. Check out the [SWCSS website](#) for more information about the referral process.

Tier 1 – Universal Supports

Who it's for: All students.

Focus: Preventative and proactive support

How to Recognize Students in Tier 1

- Student is **functioning as expected or mildly below** expectations for their grade or age.
- They may benefit from general or occasional individualized strategies, but their success in the classroom is not dependent on receiving direct, ongoing OT support.
- No major concerns about safety, independence, or classroom participation.
- A student's participation may look different from the original classroom expectation, but if they are engaging independently and meaningfully, this is not considered a functional concern. OT can support educators in recognizing and responding to different participation styles. It's important that expectations are flexible and reflect each student's current abilities.

What Supports are Available

- [OT Continuum of Supports](#)
- Universal strategies shared with the whole class or school, rather than placed on OT caseload - see [SWCSS website](#).
- OT resource navigation support.
- Learning centers or other OT related stations/activities developed by the learning team in consultation with the OT.
- General classroom observations and/or consultation with the teacher.
- Consultation with the OT to support school-wide initiatives or programs.
- Whole-class presentations or lessons.

Important Notes

- These students typically do not require direct OT service. If their needs change, OT involvement can be revisited.
- If there is no change in a student's functional needs over the school year, they will be archived from the OT caseload, with the option to re-open the student's file if new OT needs arise or the strategies recommended are no longer effective.

Tier 2 – Targeted Supports

Who it's for: Some students who may be at risk for learning or participation challenges

Focus: Short-term, focused support

How to Recognize Students in Tier 2

- Student is having **some difficulty** with school tasks that involve self-regulation, executive functioning, fine motor, visual perception, and/or self-care.
- These challenges may be slowing progress or making classroom participation harder.
- Strategies at Tier 1 have been implemented, and trialled consistently for 4-6 weeks, without meaningful change.

What Supports are Available

- Classroom observation and consultation with the learning team to understand specific needs.
- Consultation with the learning team to collaborate on strategies and/or recommendations.
- 1-2 OT visits per year to recommend and/or model tools or techniques.
- Capacity building sessions with the staff (e.g., professional development tailored to the student's needs).
- Strategy check-ins with the learning team to adjust recommendations as needed.
- All Tier 1 supports.

Important Notes

- Strategies, recommendations, and support are shared primarily with the adults working with the student.
- Students may move between Tier 1, Tier 2, and Tier 3 based on how their needs change.

Tier 3 – Complex Needs

Who it's for: A few students with high levels of need

Focus: Individualized, ongoing support

How to Recognize Students in Tier 3

- Student shows **significant difficulty** with everyday school tasks that involve self-regulation, executive functioning, fine motor, visual perception, and/or self-care.
- Challenges affect learning, safety, or inclusion on a regular basis.
- Strategies at Tier 1 and Tier 2 levels have been implemented, and trialled consistently for 4-6 weeks, without meaningful change.
- The learning team needs frequent support from OT.

What Supports are Available

- Direct, individualized strategies and intervention, either in the classroom or in a separate space.
- Observation and assessment to better understand the student's needs.
- Standardized testing if additional data is needed to guide planning.
- Support for students with high sensory needs, unsafe behaviors, or who are new to using Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC) tools.
- Frequent contact with the learning team throughout the year.
- Supporting the learning team by attending ISP/ECSP meetings, consulting on goals as needed, and providing strategies/recommendations.
- Consultation for learning teams who need to create and/or update visuals, or specialized tools.

Important Notes

- These students require a team approach and frequent collaboration with OT.
- Support plans are adjusted regularly based on progress and ongoing observations.
- Please note, the SWCSS model focuses on building staff capacity. This means that very few students will receive one-to-one pull out support.

What is Functional Impact?

Functional impact refers to how much a student's strengths or challenges affect their ability to participate in regular school routines such as completing classroom work, managing materials, following instructions, or engaging with peers and staff. A medical diagnosis does **not** automatically mean there is a functional impact if students are able to manage tasks and expectations in their current school environment. Examples include, but are not limited to:

- A student shifts positions frequently or sits at their desk during carpet time:
 - This **is** a functional impact if they are unable to listen, follow directions, or are disrupting their peers.
 - This **is not** a functional impact if they are following along and able to start the next task without extra support.
- A student has a pencil grasp that is not a tripod pencil grasp:
 - This **is** a functional impact if the student has hand cramps, fatigue, or is unable to keep up with their peers.
 - This **is not** a functional impact if the student is able to complete written work.
- A student wears diapers to school and is not toilet trained:
 - This **is** a functional impact if parents are actively working on toilet training at home and strategies need to be implemented consistently at school.
 - This **is not** a functional impact if parents are not working on toilet training at home and the student can continue to wear diapers at school.
- A student who recently received a diagnosis of ADHD:
 - This **is** a functional impact if they are struggling to focus on lessons, remember instructions, initiate or complete tasks, or regulate their emotions.
 - This **is not** a functional impact if the student is successfully participating in class as a result of strategies and support from classroom staff.
- A student who "stims" (e.g. head banging, flapping hands) to regulate their body:
 - This **is** a functional impact if the student or other's safety are at risk.
 - This **is not** a functional impact if the student engages in stimming to regulate their body.

What is Safety & Accessibility?

Safety & accessibility refer to preventing harm, and addressing significant barriers or needs so the student can engage in classroom and/or school activities. Examples include, but are not limited to:

- A student who demonstrates significant regulation challenges that may include risk of harm to themselves or others.
- Access to school environments or activities that are impacted by equipment (e.g., wheelchairs, walkers, AAC devices, toileting equipment, etc.)
- Students who spend significant time outside the classroom due to complex needs such regulation, energy levels, "behaviour", medical needs.