



How Occupational Therapy Helps Children

A comprehensive guide covering general OT support and specialized interventions for Autism, ADHD, and Sensory Processing Disorder

★ Occupational therapists (OTs) work with children to address the challenges that ADHD creates in school, home, and everyday activities. Here are the key areas where OT can make a real difference

Sensory Processing • Improve tolerance to textures, sounds, lights, and movement • Develop sensory regulation strategies • Reduce sensory-seeking or sensory-avoiding behaviors • Build an individualized sensory diet for daily regulation	Fine Motor Skills • Handwriting (letter formation, spacing, pressure) • Cutting with scissors; buttoning and zipping • Using utensils for eating • Drawing, coloring, and tracing • Bead stringing, puzzle completion	Gross Motor Skills • Balance and coordination • Body awareness (proprioception) • Bilateral coordination (both sides of the body) • Core strength and postural stability
Self-Care / ADLs • Dressing and undressing independently • Grooming (brushing teeth, hair, washing face) • Toileting skills and bathing routines • Feeding and mealtime independence	Visual-Motor Skills • Eye-hand coordination • Tracking and scanning (important for reading) • Depth perception and spatial reasoning • Copying from a board or book	Executive Function • Task initiation and follow-through • Planning and sequencing multi-step tasks • Organization of materials and workspace • Time management strategies
Emotional Regulation • Identifying and managing emotions • Coping strategies for frustration and anxiety • Self-calming techniques • Reducing meltdowns tied to environmental triggers	School & Academic Readiness • Pencil grip and endurance for writing • Sitting tolerance and desk attention • Classroom participation and direction-following • Assistive technology and adaptive tools	Feeding & Oral Motor • Expanding food repertoire for picky eaters • Managing textures and temperatures • Safe swallowing and chewing mechanics • Utensil use and mealtime behavior
Play Skills • Age-appropriate play exploration • Imaginative and creative play • Toy manipulation and engagement • Peer interaction through play	Social Participation • Turn-taking and play skills • Reading social cues • Group participation and cooperative play • Transitioning between activities	Adaptive Equipment • Pencil grips, weighted utensils, adapted scissors • Wobble cushions and footrests for seating • Home and classroom environmental adaptations • Assistive technology recommendations



OT Interventions for Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)

Sensory Integration - Ayres Sensory Integration (ASI) therapy - Vestibular input activities (swinging, spinning) - Deep pressure (weighted blankets, compression clothing) - Tactile desensitization for touch hypersensitivity - Proprioceptive activities (heavy work, pushing, pulling) - Auditory programs (Therapeutic Listening, iLs)	Communication & Social Skills - Social stories to prepare for new situations - Visual schedules and picture-based routines - AAC (Augmentative & Alternative Communication) training - Joint attention activities - Turn-taking and reciprocal play interventions - Peer-mediated play groups	Behavior & Regulation - Zones of Regulation framework - Structured routines to reduce anxiety - Transition supports (timers, warnings, visual cues) - Identifying and reducing environmental triggers - Self-advocacy skill building
Daily Living & Independence - Task analysis and step-by-step instruction - Visual checklists for morning/bedtime routines - Backward and forward chaining for skill acquisition - Toileting programs for delayed continence - Feeding therapy for extreme food selectivity	Fine Motor & Academic - Handwriting programs adapted for motor planning - Keyboarding as an alternative to handwriting - Visual-perceptual tasks to support reading and math - Adapted tools for sensory-sensitive learners	Parent & Caregiver Training - Coaching on sensory diet implementation at home - Teaching co-regulation strategies - Home program development for skill generalization



OT Interventions for ADHD

Attention & Focus - Sensory-based supports (fidget tools, movement breaks) - Environmental modifications to reduce distractions - Structured work periods with built-in breaks - Timers and visual countdowns - Preferred activity scheduling to build attention	Executive Function - Self-monitoring and self-checking strategies - Graphic organizers and checklists for tasks - Color-coded organization systems - Consistent routines across home and school - Breaking assignments into manageable steps	Impulse Control & Regulation - Zones of Regulation and emotional literacy programs - Stop-and-think strategies in daily routines - Role-playing for social situations - Sensory diet to regulate arousal levels - Teaching body awareness cues
Gross & Fine Motor - Core strengthening for postural control and seated attention - Motor coordination activities - Handwriting interventions for co-occurring dysgraphia - Yoga and movement-based therapies	School Participation - Recommending classroom accommodations - Flexible and preferential seating options - Assistive technology for note-taking and organization - Homework routine structuring - Teacher consultation on behavioral strategies	Sleep & Daily Routine - Sensory-based bedtime routines - Visual schedules for morning and evening independence - Energy management strategies across the school day



OT Interventions for Sensory Processing Disorder (SPD)

Sensory Assessment - Comprehensive sensory profile (Sensory Profile 2, SPM) - Identifying patterns: over-responsivity, under-responsivity, or seeking - Evaluating all sensory systems: tactile, vestibular, proprioceptive, auditory, visual, olfactory, gustatory, interoceptive	Sensory Integration Therapy - Ayres Sensory Integration (ASI) — child-directed, equipment-rich therapy - Swings, trampolines, crash pads, and climbing equipment - Tactile bins and brushing programs (Wilbarger Protocol) - Oral motor activities for sensory seekers/avoiders - Interoception programs for internal body awareness	Sensory Diet Development - Individualized schedule of sensory activities throughout the day "Heavy work" (pushing, carrying, wall push-ups) - Movement breaks timed to regulation needs - Calming vs. alerting activity selection - Home, school, and community-based strategies
Tactile System - Gradual desensitization to uncomfortable textures - Proprioceptive input before tactile challenges - Clothing modifications (seamless socks, tag-free shirts) - Hand-over-hand vs. hand-under-hand guidance	Vestibular System - Linear vs. rotary swinging for vestibular processing - Balance board and wobble activities - Activities to improve gravitational insecurity - Addressing motion sensitivity (car, bus, elevator)	Proprioceptive System - Weighted backpacks, lap pads, and vests - Heavy work embedded into daily routines - Joint compression and deep pressure activities - Body awareness games and obstacle courses
Auditory & Visual - Therapeutic Listening and sound-based programs - Noise-canceling headphones for over-responsive children - Tinted lenses or reduced lighting for visual sensitivity - Graduated exposure to loud or unpredictable sounds	Regulation & Behavior - Teaching children to identify their own sensory needs - Self-regulation tools (calm-down kits, sensory corners) - Parent and teacher education on sensory-based behavior - Reducing sensory avoidance through graded exposure	

References & Citations

- Schaaf, R. C., Dumont, R. L., Arbesman, M., & May-Benson, T. A. (2018). Efficacy of occupational therapy using Ayres Sensory Integration: A systematic review. *American Journal of Occupational Therapy*, 72, 7201190010.
- Crasta, J. E., Salzinger, E., Lin, M.-H., Gavin, W. J., & Davies, P. L. (2020). Sensory processing and attention profiles among children with sensory processing disorders and autism spectrum disorders. *Frontiers in Integrative Neuroscience*, 14.
- Ikuta, N., et al. (2020). Effectiveness of earmuffs and noise-cancelling headphones for coping with hyper-reactivity to auditory stimuli in children with ASD. *Hong Kong Journal of Occupational Therapy*.
- Raditha, et al. (2023). Effect of sensory integration occupational therapy (SI-OT) in improving positive behaviors of ASD children aged 2-5 years.
- Oh, et al. (2024). Effectiveness of sensory integration therapy: A meta-analysis on 24 selected studies including ASD, ADHD, cerebral palsy, and developmental disorders.
- Hopkin, A. (2023). Improving occupational engagement for children with executive dysfunction. University of North Dakota Scholarly Commons.
- Oeri, et al. (2020). Executive dysfunction and maladaptive behaviors in children with ASD and ADHD. *American Journal of Occupational Therapy*, 74(S2).
- Andelin, L., Reynolds, S., & Schoen, S. (2021). Effectiveness of occupational therapy using a sensory integration approach: A multiple-baseline design study. *American Journal of Occupational Therapy*, 75(6), 7506205030.
- Frontiers in Pediatrics (2025). Systematic review of sensory-based interventions for children and youth (2015-2024).
- McQuiddy, V. A., et al. (2024). Long-term impact of an OT intervention for children with sensory processing and integration challenges. *American Journal of Occupational Therapy*, 78, 7804185060.
- Fine motor training in children with ADHD scoping review (2021). PMC8567617.
- Sensory integration therapy for ASD systematic review (2024). PMC11506176.
- American Occupational Therapy Association (AOTA). (2022). Occupational therapy practice framework: Domain and process (4th ed.). *American Journal of Occupational Therapy*, 74(Suppl. 2), 7412410010.
- Miller, L. J., Anzalone, M. E., Lane, S. J., Cermak, S. A., & Osten, E. T. (2007). Concept evolution in sensory integration: A proposed nosology for diagnosis. *American Journal of Occupational Therapy*, 61, 135-140.

This handout is intended for educational purposes and parent/educator advocacy. Always consult a licensed occupational therapist for individualized evaluation and treatment planning.