

# Occupational Therapy in Schools



Presented by: Shawna Worden  
Director - Blossom OT Services Inc.

## What is Occupational Therapy?

Occupational Therapists (OTs) help people across the lifespan participate in the things they want and need to do through everyday activities, also known as “daily occupations”. In educational settings, this means OTs will provide intervention by engaging kids in their primary childhood occupation — **PLAY!**

As part of the team, the OT will set goals, provide ongoing assessment, and monitor progress throughout the year to help improve their performance in activities such as fine motor skills, self-help skills, sensory processing skills and self-regulation using play-based activities and strategies



**“Children do well if they can”**

**– Dr. Ross Greene**

**“There’s no such thing as a bad kid”**

**– Dr. Stuart Shanker**

## Areas of OT Focus and Support:

**Fine Motor /Visual Motor Integration Skills:** This includes how children use and control the smaller and more precise muscles of their hands and fingers. Fine motor skills include activities such as drawing, cutting, coloring, two-hand coordination (e.g. beading, lacing, fasteners on clothing) and how a child holds and manipulates objects in their hands and fingers. Adequate visual processing skills are essential to performing age expected fine motor and early literacy tasks (e.g. reading and writing).

**Self-help Skills:** Things children need to do for themselves. This includes dressing, hand washing, self-feeding, opening food packages and toileting etc. Independence is emerging in preschoolers.

**Sensory Processing:** Sensory processing refers to the way that the nervous system receives, interprets, and responds to sensory input. Sensory processing is a complex process that affects functional performance in daily routines and activities. Every person has 7 sensory systems: taste, touch, sight, sound, smell, balance (vestibular) and body awareness (proprioceptive) which help shape our understanding of the world and how we respond to it.

**Self-Regulation:** This includes our ability to manage stress to regulate our brain and body as well as our emotions to meet the needs and demands of the environment and situation.

# Important OT Developmental Milestones



## Developmental Milestones for 2 - 3 years of age:

- Manipulates play doh with hands/fingers
- Can build a tower with at least 9 blocks
- Can pick up small objects with pincer grasp (index finger and thumb)
- Can complete inset puzzles or shape sorter
- Scribbles with writing tool (immature grasp)
- Makes snips on paper with scissors
- Can screw lid on and off containers
- Can string large beads
- Zips and up-zips large zippers (no latch)
- Can use a fork or spoon (some spilling)
- Removes socks, shoes and pants (and some outdoor clothing)



## Developmental Milestones for 3 - 4 years of age:

- Can draw simple pre-printing lines and shapes ( | — ○ )
- Learns to self-position fingers in loop of scissors
- Can cut using "thumbs up" positioning forward across a piece of paper and on straight lines
- Laces a card (up and down or around)
- Will string 1/2 inch beads
- Can build simple block designs (i.e. bridge or wall)
- Can complete simple interlocking puzzles (2-4 pieces)
- Sorts objects (i.e. by color, size, shape, similarities)
- Will fasten and unfasten large buttons (not on clothing)
- Starts to use toilet (or ask to go)
- Puts on shoes and coat and pulls up pants
- Can use a fork or spoon without spilling
- Drinks from a cup



## Developmental Milestones for 4-5 years of age:

- Uses a dominant hand for fine motor tasks
- Grasps a writing tool correctly (3 or 4 finger grasp)
- Copies complex pre-printing lines/shapes ( + / □ \ x )
- Can draw a person with at least 3 body parts (aka. Mr. Potato Head drawing)
- Starts to print letters of their name (uppercase is easier and encouraged)
- Can isolate fingers to touch each finger to thumb or show numbers using fingers
- Can color within the lines with no more than ¼" deviations
- Can cut big circles and square with scissors (one direction)
- Can use "helper hand" to steer and turn the paper while cutting
- Can complete 4-6 piece interlocking puzzles
- Can build complex block designs (or designs from memory)
- Can use a fork correctly
- Can get dressed/undressed
- Emerging success in fasteners (e.g. buttons and latching zippers)
- Puts shoes on correct feet
- Toilet trained (some accidents)



## Developmental Milestones for 5-6 years of age (Kindergarten):

- Demonstrates hand dominance and consistent/efficient pencil grasp
- Can copy name from a visual model
- Builds small structures with blocks
- Can complete complex interlocking puzzles (12-16 pieces)
- Cuts well with scissors, no deviations from the line
- Recognizes and learning to print most letters of the alphabet (Learning Without Tears Program)
- Recognizes and learning to print numbers 0-10
- Learning to print 3 or more simple words
- Uses a knife to cut food and spread
- Can remember to wash hands after using toilet
- Dresses without reminders
- Uses toilet without help
- Learns to tie shoelaces



**Why Is Early Intervention OT Support Important?** These skills are ALL used frequently across ALL aspects of our daily life. They are “skills for the job of living!”

**What Does the Research Say About the Importance of Self-Regulation?** Research indicates that self-regulation in children is a predictor of academic success. Children with higher levels of self-regulation have higher scores in reading, vocabulary and math. Self-regulation skills have a stronger correlation with school readiness than IQ or entry-level reading or math skills

## Top OT Strategies/Tools for Success at Home

### ✓ **Self-Regulation and Sensory Processing Recommendations:**

- Incorporate additional movement into your child’s daily routine and into learning opportunities (e.g. animal walks to brush teeth before bed, or running up/down the stairs to do a puzzle). Activities such as heavy muscle work around the house in the form of “special jobs” can be very calming and organizing for the sensory system (e.g. shoveling snow, groceries, laundry etc.)
- VISUALS!!! Use a time timer to help support difficult transitions and drawing/pictures to help the child understand what is expected and decrease power struggles between parent and child
- Talk about emotions and label feelings through books, stories and in real-life scenarios. It is important to expand a child’s emotional vocabulary to help them better understand and express how they are feeling and to learn strategies and tools to help manage those feelings in daily life.

### ✓ **Fine Motor and Visual Motor Recommendations:**

- Exposure, practice, and repetition!!! (Remember... “Children do well if they can!” If they cannot do something, it’s not because they don’t want to, it’s often a skill deficit!). Make learning fun and set them up for success with a “just right challenge” (the child should be able to do 80% of the task and 20% of the task should be new and challenging)
- Upper body strength and strong gross motor skills are an important precursor to fine motor success. Encourage your child to lay on the stomach to work or play, or on a vertical surface (wall or easel). Expose them to lots of activities challenging their core and upper body such as hanging, climbing, pushing/pulling etc. Gymnastics and swimming are also great full body activities too!
- Ensure you have the proper tools for success (e.g. smaller tools for smaller hands such as rock crayons, Pip Squeak markers, triangle crayons, broken crayons, golf pencils etc.). Spring loaded or loop scissors are often easier for early learners when cutting.
- Fine motor manipulatives such as connector toys, puzzles, play doh, magna-tiles and beading, board games (especially with tongs are all great activities to develop all their fine motor skills!

### ✓ **Self-Help Skill Recommendations:**

- Use backward chaining to help facilitate greater participation and independence in self-help skills (i.e. the adult starts the task, and the child finishes the task). For example, instead of doing up their zipper for them, latch it at the bottom and then have them pull it up. Or start to open their snack package a little and have them open the rest.
- For all the picky eaters out there, it is important for parents to remember the division of responsibility which is “You as a parent are responsible for WHAT your child is eating and WHEN they are eating – but it is up to your child IF they eat and HOW MUCH they eat” ☺
- Allow extra time before leaving the house to have them practice getting dressed on their own and use visual pictures for each step of the routine to help them organize and sequence their actions