



Mary E. Samples, Assistant Superintendent

OCCUPATIONAL/PHYSICAL THERAPY IN THE SCHOOL SETTING: WHAT IS ITS FUNCTION?

Occupational and Physical Therapy are considered to be related services under the Individual with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). The basic intent of the law is that all children can learn despite their disabilities or challenges. As members of a multidisciplinary educational team, Occupational/Physical therapists share in the decision – making process regarding how to meet the educational needs of individual students.

Occupational/Physical Therapy is provided in the school setting to assist the student in accessing educational services and to benefit from their educational program. In contrast, clinical therapy improves overall function through the use of a variety of modalities. Most students receiving Occupational/Physical Therapy services in the schools have life-long chronic conditions that affect their learning abilities. Therapists do not aim to cure, but to assist the student to function in the school setting. Educational goals are developed to access core curriculum, while therapy goals support the attainment of these educational goals. Therapists share their knowledge and skills with school personnel regarding activities that are educationally appropriate and functional.

Since educational goals are of primary importance for students in the school setting, the amount of time and service often differ from services delivered in the clinical setting. Depending on their needs, students may be seen by a therapist as little as twice a year to update the school program or as much as once a week to work on specific skills that affect classroom functioning. A student may be seen by the Occupational/Physical therapist only once for a specific problem or for many years to help impact educational goals.

A critical feature of Occupational/Physical Therapy in the school setting is the interaction between the therapist and the educational staff. Occupational/Physical therapists cannot work in isolation in the school. They must integrate the therapy program and work as members of the student's educational team to achieve educational outcomes.