

International Handbook of Occupational Therapy Interventions

Chapter 42

Conducting Transitional Strategies that Support Children with Special Needs in Assuming Adult Roles

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I'm so happy! I didn't believe this was ever possible. She earns a salary like any other person. Thank God. This is all because of this program.

—Client's parent

Abstract Transitional strategies are systematic interventions and procedures aimed at preparing learners with special needs for entry into the labor market and independent living. It is an individualized process, where occupational therapy interventions are carefully selected to enhance academic outcomes. The transition process moves from school-based prevocational training to job placement. The focus is on the valuable role of the occupational therapist (OT). This is of particular significance in countries where transition support has not been established.

Keywords Prevocational skills • Residential independence • Social integration • Supported employment • Transition • Vocational skills

Background and Definition

The quotation at the beginning of this chapter was from an interview with the mother of 20-year-old Johanna, who has severe cerebral palsy and spastic quadriplegia. Johanna underwent the occupation therapy-based prevocational training and transition support and now works as a kitchen assistant in a school hostel.

Access to equal work opportunities has become a major focus for youth services worldwide (UK Cabinet Office Strategy, 2007; US National Council on Disability, 2000). Young people with special needs due to disabilities are faced with numerous challenges. Therefore, they require specialized support to achieve successful transition to become adult workers (Burgstahler, 2003; Smart, 2004; Van Niekerk, 2007).

Transition is a habilitative strategy, and may include maintenance, preventative, or adaptive interventions aimed at changing the role of child to the role of adult.

It covers the period between ages 16 and 25 years. Because an individual's ability to work forms an integral part of the adult's role, it is therefore the major focus of transition programs (U.S. Federal Government, 2004).

Transition outcomes are described in terms of employment, social and interpersonal networks, and role adaptation in the residential environment (Liu et al., 2007). It is an individualized process that starts in high school, where programming includes and emphasizes (1) work readiness, that is, prevocational preparation combined with vocational or work-specific preparation; and (2) social and life skills required for successful community integration. Transition further entails the commencement of ongoing supported employment, through which the individual gains access to meaningful work, and more importantly, is able to maintain it.

The outcome of transitional programs (Halpern, 1985) is the product of multi-disciplinary inputs, involving a range of professionals, such as educators, facilitators, medical professionals, physiotherapists, speech therapists, and adult rehabilitation service representatives, as well as the client's parents, employers, and others in the community (Wehman et al., 1985). Here, OTs have a knowledge base (Du Toit, 1991; Kielhofner, 2004) that is suitable for contributing to the transitional process as team members. Finally, the outcome of a transitional program is largely dependent on the client's motivation.

Purpose

Transitional programs are aimed at optimally developing clients' ability to efficiently perform tasks with specifically focus on work ability. The ultimate goal is successful integration into adult contexts.

Method

Candidates for the Intervention

Children with special needs who would benefit from rehabilitation services or would qualify for social support due to disability are candidates for this transitional intervention.

Epidemiology

All learners with special education needs will benefit from transition services, particularly those with more severe disabilities. Transition services are new in the South African context, and statistically significant data have not been gathered to establish reliable figures for the need for such services.

Settings

Referral for transitional program support usually occurs from (a) school-based support services that serve learners with special needs, or (2) health settings providing rehabilitation services. The occupational therapy transition service has a wide scope of interventions, such as health related, educational, social-emotional, or work related. This intervention may occur in a number of settings: school-based, community-based, or in the workplace.

The Role of the Occupational Therapist

In the process of supported employment, OTs acts as facilitators of vocational training and job placement. The OTs roles are that of a job coach. During the phase of prevocational preparation of the transitional process, the OTs focus on work and work behaviors, but all performance areas are systematically addressed to ensure that clients achieve optimal independence in their different adult roles.

Results

Clinical Application

Transitional programs entail a client-centered process where goal setting and intervention strategies are individualized. It is the product of thorough and ongoing assessment and problem solving.

An outline of the elements of supported employment applied to the OT's transition interventions is shown in Table 42.1 (Wehman et al., 1992).

The application of transitional strategies follows the occupational therapy process, and includes *assessments*, which are conducted by applying a holistic human development and function. It is wise to balance standardized, formal evaluations with clinical observations, work simulations, and collateral information gained from parents or caregivers or other members of the team. In the school setting the OT has access to comprehensive records covering background information, education, function, and multidisciplinary intervention.

The need for formal testing is often limited to the child's specific performance areas that have not been observed or addressed in previous interventions. The following functional areas are to be considered during the assessment process: (1) sensorimotor skills, (2) cognitive components, (3) cognitive integration, (4) psychosocial skills, (5) psychological performance components, and (6) adaptation in the performance areas of activities, work, and leisure (American Occupational Therapy Association Terminology Task Force, 1994). Information on performance

Table 42.1 Supported employment elements applied in occupational therapy transition strategies

| Support element | Occupational therapy strategies |
|---|--|
| Consumer assessment (function, skills, interest) | Holistic assessment and analysis of all performance areas, components, and contexts. |
| Job development (job analysis and job matching, environmental adaptation and job modification) | Identify, generate, and negotiate appropriate in-service training positions. Apply principles of activity analysis, work simplification, and ergonomics to plan and implement structural or task adaptations, provide assistive technology, and ensure that both client and employer benefit. |
| Job placement | Therapeutic group work is used to train work-seeking behavior. Support (co-working and training) is given to achieve appropriate level of integration and performance when initialized into a job. Coworkers and employers are given support and training in strategies to effectively monitor and manage the client's work performance and integration. Regular on-site visits are performed to evaluate actual status. |
| Employer liaison, and job-site interventions (training, behavior management) with use of job retention strategies | Build professional relationships with employers, have regular feedback sessions, and offer therapeutic intervention to address or prevent problem areas identified by client, employer, job coach, or coworkers. |
| Individualized support | Coordinate and facilitate service delivered to address needs in all performance areas: health management, work, household management and independent living, transport and mobility, social integration, and leisure pursuits. |

contexts is vital to ensure accurate and appropriate planning and programming for transition. The specific area of assessment of vocational skills should include aptitude tests, interest inventories, and prevocational readiness, which is best investigated through the use of work samples (Jacobs, 1991).

Planning of the transitional program should commence at the age of 14. Based on a critical analysis of the information gained during assessment, the therapist provides guidelines to the educational team regarding curricular components that would benefit the child's transition.

Occupational therapy program goals are objective stated and reasonable to attain during therapeutic sessions both in the school and in real community settings. It is recommended that individual intervention is limited, and preference be given to group work, as it supports the development of appropriate work behaviors in a therapeutic environment. Biannual review and reevaluation will be beneficial in ensuring that the process takes place smoothly and that appropriate goals are being pursued.

Prevocational Preparation

Education programs are enhanced by the OT providing the support and accommodations required by the learner's disability in the classroom, and also by

including prevocational preparation in the form of task-centered therapeutic groups, marketable skills groups, and natural community and workplace experiences, with a specific focus on training prevocational skills (Jacobs, 1991).

The Youth Transition Program Model (Benz et al., 1999) provides an outline of how such a program should be constituted, with emphasis on the development of a good work ethic. It has been applied by Little People's School (Jacobs, 1991) and Pretoria School (Nel et al., 2007), which are examples of how the occupational therapy service complements the curriculum to achieve successful prevocational preparation.

How the Intervention Eases Impairments, Activity Limitations, and Participation Restrictions

Transitional strategies redefine disabled children's perspective on the future, moving them from the role of disabled person to empowered worker, thus being able to (1) engage in a variety of relationships, (2) contribute through service to the society, and (3) develop personal strengths and skills (Inman et al., 2007; Seyfarth et al., 1987; U.S. Federal Government, 2004).

Evidence-Based Practice

The success of transition strategies may be measured according to several parameters, such as, work, income, residential independence, personal satisfaction, and parent/caregiver satisfaction (Blackorby and Wagner, 1996). Very little evidence of OT-based prevocational training, vocational preparation, and transition in schools exists in the literature. The growing interest in this field of practice among school-based OTs, especially in developing countries, is indicative of the need for this service. New programs should be developed based on the successes of existing models, and allowing for adaptations relevant to the context (Mithaug, 1994) provides guidelines in this regard.

Discussion

The literature reflects lower than desired levels of success for persons who underwent transition support. However, personal communications verify the need for OTs to work with children living with disabilities. "There is a need to expand the focus in preparing learners for transition from school to the vocational environment" (Dr. Kitty Uys, personal communication, 2008). If this should become a reality, research that proves the evidence of transitional programs is greatly needed. This research may contribute to changing the attitude that vocational preparation and transition services are labor intensive and may be seen as a luxury.

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