
School OT Crisis Response & Prevention

Occupational Performance Impact/Role of Occupational Therapy

Crisis response and prevention is an important component of the scope of practice of school occupational therapy practitioners. Methods used to physically manage a student's behavior or involuntarily confine their movement are dangerous and may cause trauma. Many schools have stopped using restraint and seclusion and have adopted crisis prevention and response methods to address the needs of students experiencing emotional and behavioral distress. Consistent crisis prevention and response interventions can be incorporated into multi-tiered systems of support (MTSS) at the school, classroom, small group, and individual levels. Occupational therapy practitioners collaborate with educators and other school personnel to provide multiple levels of intervention that address crisis response and prevention.

This decision guide describes proactive evidence-based strategies within the scope of occupational therapy practice and can be used when working with students who are experiencing emotional and behavioral distress.

Promote Mental Wellness Across Contexts

Multidisciplinary School Team

- Train interdisciplinary staff on restraint reduction interventions, including how to identify, implement, and evaluate outcomes related to short- and long-term goals for restraint reduction.
- Educate families and school personnel on signs and symptoms of emotional and behavioral distress and who to notify.
- Use evidence-based and culturally responsive strategies to address emotional and behavioral health concerns and create a supportive school climate.
- Educate staff on trauma-informed care and trauma-responsive approaches to avoid retraumatization.
- Incorporate movement and mindfulness (e.g., breathing, quiet reflection) breaks throughout the school day.

Students

- Provide education to students and school personnel on effective, non-violent communication.
- Coach student leaders to identify, address, and report mistreatment (e.g., bullying, putdowns, exclusion) of other students.
- Teach students social skills, rules, expected behaviors, and self-regulation skills.
- Promote positive relationships among students in the classroom, cafeteria, and playground.
- Teach students to become aware of their early triggers and provide safe spaces for breaks and use of effective calming strategies.

Prevent Further Existing Symptoms

School Team (including teachers, administrators, related services providers, student, and family)

- Consult with educators and other school personnel to integrate movement (e.g., yoga), mindfulness breaks, and trauma-informed strategies into daily routines.
- Consult with teachers, families, and other school personnel to develop an individualized plan to support the student and facilitate de-escalation and promote overall health and wellness.

Students

- Perform comprehensive assessments of client's strengths, facilitators, and barriers to occupational performance.
- Document assessment results for students with difficulties processing sensory information. Provide sensory equipment as needed.
- Modify and adapt classroom environments (e.g., reduce distractions and triggers) and other contextual features to support students' emotional and behavioral wellness.
- Provide opportunities for students to engage in preferred creative arts activities (e.g., drumming, blogging) that allow for individual expression.
- Use play-based approaches to support behavior regulation and social emotional development.
- Teach students to self-monitor and request breaks and coping strategies as needed.
- Teach students how to effectively communicate and build positive relationships with adults and peers.
- Encourage students with individualized education plans (IEPs) to attend and participate in their meetings.

AOTA Resources

- AOTA—[Mental/Behavior Health and Wellbeing Decision Guide](#)
- AOTA—[Choosing Wisely Guide to Sensory-specific and Related Assessments](#)
- AOTA—[Occupational Therapy Practice Guidelines for Children and Youth 5-21](#)
- AOTA—[Addressing Acute Stress and Trauma—Decision Guide for COVID-19](#)
- AOTA—[Societal Statement on Stress, Trauma, and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder](#)

Additional Resources

These websites provide information and resources for occupational therapy practitioners engaging in crisis prevention and response.

- [PBIS World](#)
- [STAR Institute](#)
- [FAB Strategies](#)
- [National Alliance of Specialized Instructional Support Personnel \(NASISP\)](#)
- [The National Center for Pyramid Model Innovations](#)

Resources

Fraser, K., MacKenzie, D., & Versnel, J. (2017). Complex trauma in children and youth: A scoping review of sensory-based interventions. *Occupational Therapy in Mental Health, 33*(3), 199–216.

Grasley-Boy, N. M., Reichow, B., van Dijk, W., & Gage, N. A. (2020, May 4). Systematic review of Tier 1 PBIS implementation in alternative education settings. *Behavioral Disorders, doi 0198742920915648*.

Pat-Horenczyk, R., & Yochman, A. (2020). Sensory modulation in children exposed to continuous traumatic stress. *American Journal of Occupational Therapy, 74*(4_Supplement_1), 7411505189p1, doi 7411505189p1.

Authors

John Pagano, PhD, OTR/L
Faculty, Department of Occupational Therapy
Quinnipiac University

Susan Cahill, PhD, OTR/L, FAOTA
Director of Evidence Based Practice
OTA