

The importance of occupational therapy to people with Learning Disabilities

Key facts:

Occupational therapists work with learning disabled people of all ability levels to support occupation in education, employment and independent living. They are experts in occupational well-being, assessment of function and activity analysis working alongside carers, families and health and social care professionals supporting a person-centred approach (College of Occupational Therapists, 2007).

Families caring for a son or daughter with profound intellectual and multiple disabilities face an exceptionally heavy responsibility of care (Mansell, 2010). Recent research (Emerson, 2009) estimates that there are just over 16,000 adults with profound intellectual and multiple disabilities in England, a figure which is rising. Those with high levels of disability require support with most aspects of daily life and may have additional sensory or physical disabilities, complex health needs or mental health difficulties including challenging behaviours.

To support those with learning disabilities, carers and services occupational therapists:

- Assess and recommend support levels for individuals
- Provide skills training to decrease support needs
- Support carers and colleagues – advice on equipment and adaptation for home, school or short term care
- Assess and support skills for social inclusion
- Address behavioural needs through use of specialist approaches such as sensory integration (Urwin and Ballinger, 2005) and intensive interaction
- Analyse activity for engagement to increase attention and promote quality of life in the most profoundly disabled
- Develop and maintain the individual in their daily independent living skills (Lillywhite and Haines, 2010)
- Support communication needs
- Support mainstream colleagues in the provision of services to the individual. The findings of the report "Healthcare for all" (Michaels, 2008) outlines the rights of the individual with learning disabilities to access primary health care
- Improve skills, access and inclusion enabling individuals to engage in healthy activity
- Assess work skills and support requirements for access of individuals to paid and voluntary occupation

Cost Benefits:

Cost benefits relate to the teaching and maintaining of skills in independent living, support and advice to those providing care and ensuring that packages of care are appropriate and effective thereby minimising need for residential placement and reducing support and care costs (Knapp et al 2005).

The promotion of healthier life styles and access to timely primary health care will reduce the long term effects of sedentary occupations, and poor health education.

Advice and support such as equipment, adaptation and on behaviours for families and caregivers will decrease the effects of emotional and physical strain on carer's health.



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