



OCCUPATIONAL THERAPY PRACTITIONERS can help young children with an ASD dress and feed themselves; be more comfortable with different sights, sounds, and sensations; play; make friends; and do well in preschool. The following tips are from occupational therapy practitioners working with preschool children on the autism spectrum.

If you want to:

Help your preschool child with self-care activities like getting dressed, eating, and brushing teeth on his or her own.

Consider these activity tips:

- Do self-care activities in the same way at the same time each day to create routines. Help your child remember what to do by showing pictures, pretending to do the activity yourself, saying the next step out loud, or singing songs with directions. Making activities predictable can reduce anxiety and help your child succeed.

An occupational therapy practitioner offers expertise to:

- Analyze how your child does activities and interacts with family members to highlight areas to address.
- Teach your child new ways of doing things or help your child link one step of the task to the next.
- Help your child develop physical, mental, and perceptual skills that will help him or her to do self-care activities.
- Create individual ways for your child to succeed, such as breaking the task into small, simple steps; helping your child stay calm and organized; and determining the reminders that best help your child learn.

Help your child tolerate different sensory experiences, such as sights, sounds, touch, smells, taste and textures, and movement.

- Carefully observe how your child responds to different sensory experiences: What makes him or her uncomfortable? What does he or she like? What helps him or her calm down? Share this information with the preschool teacher and family members so your child doesn't get distressed.
- When possible, adjust the features of the environment so your child does not encounter overwhelming types or amounts of sensory stimulation (e.g., turn down loud music). If this is not possible, anticipate situations your child might find difficult and be prepared to use the strategies that help your child stay calm, such as offering favorite objects or a snuggly blanket.

- Evaluate your child's ability to integrate different sensory information and create a profile to help select the best treatment.
- Create ways to support your child when he or she expresses discomfort or becomes distressed.
- Help your child become more comfortable with new sensory experiences.
- Identify calming or stimulating sensory experiences that your child can use throughout the day.
- Teach your child coping skills for when things don't go as planned.

If you want to:

Help your child play with others and with toys.

Consider these activity tips:

- Offer to host small play dates at your home with your friends and their children. Being at home can allow you and your child to feel more in control of the experience, activities, and amount and type of stimulation.
- Use activities that your child has more success with and is interested in (e.g., puzzles and board games can be less stimulating than video games or physical play). If playing at your home is not an option, keep social situations small and short. Explain to other parents that your child has autism, and that you need to reduce the stimulation that may make your child uncomfortable. Remember to end the play if your child is not having fun.

An occupational therapy practitioner offers expertise to:

- Determine new ways for your child to play with toys or pretend materials (e.g., in the dress up or play kitchen areas at preschool) so he or she is comfortable.
- Teach specific social behaviors, such as sharing, making eye contact, asking for more of a preferred activity, indicating “all done” with an activity, and taking turns.
- Help your child be flexible when playing with friends and learn to go from one activity to another with less distress.
- Support you so that you can help your child learn new skills, vary how you play with your child, and break complicated activities into smaller steps.
- Share ways to build up to new experiences based on your child’s particular skills and challenges.

Want More Information?

Children of preschool age may be eligible to receive occupational therapy in the school environment through the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). It is important to become familiar with the laws so you can participate in your child’s preschool program and take an active role in developing your child’s goals. Services are also covered by your health insurance company and can be found in private clinics, local health centers, or local children’s hospitals. Pediatricians can help parents identify the local occupational therapy programs whose staff have experience working with children on the autism spectrum. You can find additional information through the American Occupational Therapy Association at www.aota.org.

Occupational therapy is a skilled health, rehabilitation, and educational service that helps people across the lifespan participate in the things they want and need to do through the therapeutic use of everyday activities (occupations).

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