Addressing performance and participation in occupational therapy: the importance of cognition

Carolyn Baum, Erin Foster and Tim Wolf

Never in history has it been more important for occupational therapists to make our unique contribution to health and community care known. Our distinctive focus is on everyday performance and participation. Because of this broad perspective, we can work across traditional service boundaries with people who have many different medical and societal conditions. We can address the needs of individuals, families and communities as they develop skills and strategies to manage and succeed in the multiple roles, activities and tasks necessary for daily life. For this reason, we fill a vital need in the health care community and for the clients we serve.

Performance and participation are broad constructs that describe the ability of a person to engage satisfactorily in his or her chosen occupations and roles in home, work and community environments. To support our clients in fulfilling these goals, occupational therapists must have a comprehensive toolbox of knowledge, skills and measures. This toolbox must address the broad range of personal, environmental and occupational factors that underlie performance and participation. It must also cover the life span, accommodating infants, students, adults raising families and working, and 100-year-old individuals who still have aspirations for tomorrow.

To address performance and participation fully and to solidify our unique and vital role in the health care community, occupational therapists need to expand our toolboxes to include the evaluation and treatment of several factors with which we have not traditionally identified. One particularly relevant and timely example is cognition.

Although we have come to understand how motor and some language impairments impact on performance, the ability to perform complex everyday activities also requires individuals to make decisions, self-correct and use judgement (Burgess et al 2006). These higher-order cognitive abilities, or executive functions, underlie and support the performance of daily life activities, which allow individuals to engage meaningfully with families and friends and remain productive members of their communities and society (Katz and Hartman-Maeir 2005).

Executive function impairment may compromise an individual's ability to participate fully in society; in fact, links between executive function impairment, performance and participation have been documented in individuals with many conditions, including head injury (Goverover and Hinojosa 2002), stroke (Baum et al 2008), Alzheimer's disease, spinal cord injury (Hanks et al 1999), Parkinson's disease (Klepac et al 2008), psychiatric disorders (Gildengers et al 2007), autism (Rutherford et al 2007), multiple sclerosis (Kalmar et al 2008) and cancer (Nieuwenhuijzen et al 2008).

Occupational therapists must therefore begin to exercise our role in addressing this factor. We must assess cognition – in particular, executive function – and its impact on performance and participation. Then, if difficulties exist, occupational therapists must develop interventions to address them. By offering environmental and behavioural strategies so that clients can compensate for cognitive difficulties and maintain self-management, instrumental, personal, family, work and community roles, occupational therapists will provide their clients with more comprehensive support and enhanced opportunity truly to reach optimal performance and full participation.


Continued on page 152
School participation of pupils with physical and psychosocial limitations: a comparison


Continued from page 143


Nieuwenhuijsen K, de Boer A, Spelten E, Sprangers MA, Verbeek JH (2008) The role of neuropsychological functioning in cancer survivors’ return to work one year after diagnosis. Psychooncology, 22 October. (Epub ahead of print.)