

Combining Occupational Therapy (OT) with Applied Behaviour Analysis (ABA) to achieve the best outcomes for children with Autistic Spectrum Disorder (ASD).

By Joanne Harries

Occupational Therapy is a science driven evidence based profession that enables people of all ages to live life to its fullest by promoting health, and preventing or aiding with illness, injury or disability. The aim is to help individuals of all ages achieve their full potential in all areas of daily living.

When Occupational Therapists work with the paediatric population the fundamental areas of occupation include: activities of daily living; such as, eating, sleeping and bathing together with leisure activities, social interactions, education and play. It is imperative to base assessments, therapeutic interventions, and outcome measurement on robust evidence based research where possible.

Applied Behaviour Analysis is a set of principles based on the science of behaviour forming an evidence-based treatment with an emphasis on identifying, evaluating, addressing and managing positive and negative behaviours. Applied Behaviour Analysis is a learning programme aimed at teaching children with autism to reach their full learning potential and increase the opportunity of living independently.

The main aim of Occupational Therapy and Applied Behaviour Analysis is ensuring an individual has the skills needed to be as independent as possible.

Occupational Therapy focuses on underlying developmental components following a pyramid of growth and development, initially focusing on sensory systems, reflex integration, regulation, and postural mechanisms. Skills are improved and increased like building blocks, with the maturity of body scheme and behavioural organisation being the subsequent blocks to add to our foundations. Once the fundamentals of development are embedded along with perception and motor organisation, cognition and academics are progressed and advanced.

Applied Behaviour Analysis uses assessments; such



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as, The Verbal Behaviour Milestones Assessment and Placement Program (VB-MAPP); an individualised language, social skills and learning curriculum, and The Assessment of Basic Language and Learning Skills (ABLLS-R). These assessments are the groundwork on which a program plan is developed focusing on the deficit areas identified

and defined. Each element of the plan is broken down into smaller, practicable tasks which are taught intensively with a focus on repetition and the rewarding of successful responses.

Paediatric Occupational Therapy implements a fun, energetic and playful approach in an environment designed to capture and motivate a child. For some individuals with autism Occupational Therapy can be an essential part of the therapeutic and learning process.

Occupational Therapy follows a therapeutic process of evaluation, intervention and outcomes and underpins the entire interaction between a child and their therapist. When a therapist first interacts with a family the main objective is to initially gather information relating to the child, such as their developmental history, and identify their Occupational Therapy needs relating to functional performance in line with developmental progression. A vital part of the process is to identify key areas of difficulty; such as, motor skills, motor planning, play skills, and sensory needs. This may be through observation as well as formal and informal assessments which will help to identify and establish meaningful SMART goals.



When combining approaches and interventions, such as Occupational Therapy and Applied Behaviour Analysis, it is important to focus on functional skills following a developmental sequence; such as, dressing, feeding and toileting. The behavioural technique to teach the skills can then be decided and the pre-requisite motor skills required to execute the task in its entirety can be established. For example: body awareness, hand grasp, good range of movement within the shoulder joint, and bilateral integration are some of the skills required to begin teaching dressing. As part of Occupational Therapy sessions, each of the foundations skills can be taught in an incidental manner utilising a variety of games and activities that are fun and engaging. The sessions can also focus on the acquisition of identified pre-requisite motor skills to help the child prepare for learning the functional skill, thus enabling the skill to be taught in one sequence using Applied Behaviour Analysis strategies.

Occupational Therapy and Applied Behaviour Analysis professionals employ the same principles when focusing on the acquisition of complex skills by breaking tasks down using the skill of task analysis, followed by the individual components being taught as discrete skills therefore maximising the learning opportunities. Once each component of the task analysis has been learnt, the whole activity can be taught using techniques such

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as forward and backward chaining.

Motor planning plays a vital role across many of the activity domains of children and is especially important when learning motor skills; such as, catching a ball, racket skills and handwriting. When a child is taught imitation skills they will be guided to execute non-automatic movements and motor sequences, therefore, motor planning is a key skill required and remains one of the biggest challenges an individual with autism faces.

In my daily practise as a Specialist Consultant Occupational Therapist, I often employ techniques learnt from training in Applied Behaviour Analysis including: pairing, using positive reinforcement, gaining instructional control and understanding various functions of a behaviour. Some principles of Applied Behaviour Analysis provide me with a foundation to maximise any potential learning opportunities within Occupational Therapy sessions. The knowledge and experience I have acquired over time enables me to successfully collaborate with Applied Behaviour Analysis professionals when working with individuals.

There are many benefits of using a behavioural approach to Occupational Therapy; including, a successful framework for collecting and analysing data to ensure children are meeting their goals, research backed procedures that are likely

to produce optimal outcomes, and the ability to yield measurable results. The data collected will allow early identification of ineffective interventions thus enabling the teaching method to be adapted to maximise learning opportunities and ensure functional skills are being taught at a quicker rate.



This article first appeared in the Treating Autism members newsletter. For more information on how Treating Autism can help you please visit www.treatingautism.org.uk

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