THE IMPACT OF OCCUPATIONAL THERAPY ON THE REHABILITATION OF CHILDREN WITH AUTISM

IMPACTUL TERAPIEI OCUPAȚIONALE ÎN REABILITAREA COPIILOR CU AUTISM

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Rezumat*: Analiza contextului național relevă faptul că, deși terapia ocupațională este recunoscută la nivel internațional ca parte integrantă a echipelor multidisciplinare, în Republica Moldova ea nu este încă pe deplin integrată în protocoalele clinice de diagnostic și tratament ale TSA. Cu toate acestea, există un interes crescând față de valorificarea potențialului acestei forme de terapie, ceea ce subliniază necesitatea dezvoltării politicilor publice și a resurselor instituționale în acest domeniu. Iar rezultatele intervenției practice aplicate în cadrul studiului de față confirmă eficiența abordării ocupaționale în sprijinul dezvoltării copilului cu TSA, evidențiind progrese în plan motric, comportamental și cognitiv. Implicarea activă a familiei, folosirea metodelor de evaluare funcțională și adaptarea mediului au constituit factori cheie în atingerea obiectivelor terapeutice.În situația actuală de creștere a incidenței tulburărilor din spectrul autismului (TSA), abordările terapeutice eficiente și personalizate devin tot mai necesare pentru a sprijini integrarea și dezvoltarea copiilor cu astfel de dizabilități. În acest context, terapia ocupațională a devenit una dintre cele mai eficiente metode de intervenție, având ca scop principal dezvoltarea și îmbunătățirea abilităților funcționale ale copilului. Terapia ocupațională în cazul copiilor cu autism vizează adaptarea acestora la mediul înconjurător, îmbunătățirea motricității fine și grosiere, dezvoltarea abilităților de autoîngrijire și a strategiilor senzoriale care îi ajută să facă față stimulilor din mediul exterior. Printr-o abordare personalizată și multidisciplinară, terapeuții ocupaționali contribuie la integrarea copiilor cu TSA în familie, școală și comunitate.*

Cuvinte-cheie*: autonomie, dezvoltare, integrare, ocupație, terapie.*

INTRODUCTION

In the current context of the increasing prevalence of Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), effective and personalized therapeutic approaches have become increasingly

necessary to support the integration and development of children with such disabilities. Occupational therapy has emerged as one of the most effective intervention methods, with its primary goal being the development and enhancement of the child's functional abilities. In the case of children with autism, occupational therapy focuses on adapting them to their environment, improving both fine and gross motor skills, developing self-care abilities, and implementing sensory strategies that help them cope with external stimuli. Through a personalized and multidisciplinary approach, occupational therapists play a vital role in facilitating the integration of children with ASD into their families, schools, and communities [1,2].

MATERIAL AND METHODS

Occupational therapy is a form of intervention aimed at improving a child's independence and functionality in daily activities (occupations), through the use of specific methods and techniques. It focuses on the development of motor, sensory, cognitive, and social skills essential for successful integration into everyday life.

Occupations encompass self-care activities (such as dressing and feeding), productive activities (such as school and work), and leisure activities (such as play and hobbies) [3].

The history of occupational therapy dates back thousands of years and has often been confused with other forms of occupation throughout human development. Physical activities such as play, exercise, and sustained manual labor were traditionally employed for their therapeutic effects on those who engaged in them. To gain a clearer understanding of the field of occupational therapy, it is useful to begin by examining the definition formulated by the American Occupational Therapy Association in 1968. According to this definition, occupational therapy is "the art and science of directing man's response to selected activity to promote and maintain health, to prevent disability, to evaluate behavior, and to treat or train patients with physical or social dysfunctions" [1,4].

A widely accepted global definition also states that "Occupational therapy is the art and science of guiding human participation in purposeful tasks to restore, sustain, or enhance performance; to facilitate the learning of skills and functions essential for adaptation and productivity; to diminish or correct pathological conditions; and to promote mental health" [2,3].

Occupational therapy addresses three general and essential domains, each encompassing specific areas of focus:

- Development of skills for daily living, including artistic activities.
- Training in work-related capacities and skills.
- Education in play and recreational activities.

To achieve an optimal functional level in these areas, it is crucial to train individuals to reach specific performance goals. These performances are organized into several fundamental components:

- Sensorimotor skills, involving coordination and movement control;

- Cognitive skills, related to thinking and learning processes;
- Psychosocial skills, referring to social adaptation and interaction.

Occupational therapy is not merely a treatment method, but rather a deeply human form of support, based on the belief that every individual-regardless of their challenges-has the potential to lead a fulfilling and active life. In the case of children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD), these principles become even more essential, as the intervention must be empathetic, personalized, and grounded in the daily reality of the child and their family [5].

One of the core principles of occupational therapy is the child-centered approach. This means that the therapist does not follow a one-size-fits-all protocol, but instead seeks to understand each child individually: what motivates them, what calms them, how they learn most effectively, and what makes them feel secure. Every intervention is tailored to the child's personality and specific needs, with the goal of helping them participate in daily life as naturally as possible [6].

Another key principle is the use of meaningful activities. For a child, therapy is not just about exercises - it is about play, discovery, and connection. Through structured games and the imitation of daily routines (such as dressing, brushing teeth, or eating independently), the child is supported in developing autonomy and self-confidence. Activities are selected not only for their therapeutic value, but also because they are enjoyable and motivating for the child [5].

Occupational therapy consistently aims to foster independence. Children with ASD may face difficulties performing tasks that other children acquire naturally. This is why, through step-by-step exercises, patience, and encouragement, they gradually develop practical and functional skills[2].

Another important aspect is collaboration with the family and other professionals. The occupational therapist often works in a multidisciplinary team that includes parents, educators, psychologists, and speech therapists, ensuring a comprehensive and consistent approach. The child's living environment is also taken into account, with efforts made to adapt it to be more supportive and accessible - for example, organizing rooms or creating visual routines [2,5].

All interventions are grounded in continuous assessments and evidence-based practices. Progress is monitored step by step, and strategies are adjusted accordingly. Every small success is considered a meaningful victory, both for the child and for those supporting their development.

Establishing an effective therapeutic program for children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) requires a comprehensive initial assessment that integrates both standardized and observational investigation methods. These tools are not solely intended to confirm the diagnosis, but more importantly, to outline each child's individual profile by identifying their functional strengths and challenges. This personalized understanding is essential for setting targeted therapeutic objectives [2].

One of the valuable instruments used is the Vineland Adaptive Behavior Scales,

which provides insight into the child's level of autonomy in daily living activities (ADLs), such as eating, hygiene, dressing, and communication. In occupational therapy practice, the Canadian Occupational Performance Measure (COPM) is also recommended. This is a family-centered tool that helps establish occupational priorities from the perspective of the parent and, when possible, the child [7].

In addition to standardized instruments, a significant role is played by direct clinical observation, behavioral analysis during play, and semi-structured interviews with parents. These methods enable the therapist to gather information in natural contexts - such as the child's behavior at home, on the playground, or in kindergarten - thus offering deeper insight into the environmental and personal factors that influence the child's participation in daily activities [5].

Assessment is not a static process. Throughout the entire intervention, evaluation tools are re-administered periodically to monitor progress and adjust the therapeutic program according to the child's evolving needs. This dynamic approach enables flexible yet well-grounded interventions, enhancing the effectiveness and relevance of occupational therapy in the rehabilitation of children with ASD.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Autism spectrum disorders (ASD) present a complex challenge, affecting not only the child but also the family and the professionals involved in the rehabilitation process. Based on the findings of this study and the reviewed literature, occupational therapy emerges as a fundamental tool in supporting the functional development of children with ASD. Through personalized interventions, occupational therapy contributes not only to the improvement of fine motor skills, visual-motor coordination, and self-care abilities, but also to the enhancement of communication, attention, and social interaction.

Developmentally appropriate and interest-based activities foster autonomy and self-confidence - critical elements for active participation in daily life. Early diagnosis and intervention are essential in helping children with autism reach their full developmental potential. The primary goal of treatment is to improve the child's overall functional abilities, tailored to individual needs and family resources.

For parents of children with autism, adopting a proactive approach in understanding the condition and available treatment options is crucial. Equally important is prioritizing their health and well-being to cope with the challenges of raising and supporting a child with autism. Thus, maintaining a balance between caregiving and self-care is vital for long-term success in managing this disorder.

CONCLUSIONS

Occupational therapy represents a fundamental component in the rehabilitation of children with autism, having a significant impact on their functional development. Through a personalized approach, it contributes to the improvement of motor, sensory,

cognitive, and social skills, thereby facilitating the child's participation in daily activities and integration into the social environment. Through structured activities and therapeutic play, the child learns to interact more effectively with family members, peers, and therapists, ultimately enhancing their quality of life and fostering integration into the community.

In conclusion, occupational therapy plays a vital role in the recovery of children with autism, providing essential support for acquiring key skills and achieving greater independence. Through individualized interventions and a multidisciplinary approach, it can significantly contribute to the harmonious development and social inclusion of children with disabilities.

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