The Value of School-Based Occupational Therapy During the Era of COVID-19

NC Department of Public Instruction, Exceptional Children Division
Supporting Teaching and Related Services Section
Bridgette LeCompte, MS, OTR/L & Halie Ellinger, MSOT

Providing remote and in-person services as schools reopen during the era of COVID-19 presents novel challenges which require resilience, flexibility, and creativity from students, families, and professionals.

OT practitioners provide a unique perspective and skillset to problem-solve and implement innovative solutions for the person, environment, and occupation. Due to the current context and disruption in routines, there is a need for OT practitioners to provide both systems levels of support for all students and staff and individualized interventions which address well-being, equity, and accessibility.

The categories below highlight important areas to address in consideration of the impacts of COVID-19. Each category is hyperlinked with intervention ideas and resources to guide practice. This resource is not intended to be comprehensive or a requirement, but rather to provide helpful considerations for shifting practices to support students and others during this time. Decisions and interventions should continue to be individualized and collaborative to meet the unique needs of students, families, teams, schools, and systems. Practitioners should refer to and adhere to the safety and health guidance provided by the NC DHHS Strong Schools and NC DPI Lighting our Way Forward documents.

Self-Care

- Hygiene
- Routines
- Physical activity
- Self-regulation

Mental Health

- Social-emotional skills
- Coping strategies
- Social participation
- Leisure & relaxation

COVID-19

- Wearing a mask
- Social distancing
- Handwashing
- Interoception

Academics

- Work and study habits
- Organization
- Following a schedule
- Technology management

Systems Level

- Environmental modifications
- Teacher support
- Student programming
- Occupational justice & advocacy

Transitions

- Environments
- Tasks
- Post-secondary
- Self-determination

Please contact the Consultant for Occupational Therapy, Bridgette LeCompte, with any questions at Bridgette.LeCompte@dpi.nc.gov or (984) 236-2638.

Self-Care

Hygiene

In-person:
- Teach skills and expectations for hand washing, keeping hands away from face, and avoiding touching others and their materials (use social stories, songs, visuals, etc.).
- Provide social stories or modeling to demonstrate proper etiquette for sneezing or coughing and keeping classroom areas clean.

Remote:
- Review proper hygiene etiquette for virtual classes.
- Use video modeling and screen sharing to demonstrate proper handwashing and support other self-care skills.

Both:
- Provide age-appropriate education on COVID-19 and important hygiene practices to promote students' health and safety.

Routines

In-person:
- Complete a task-analysis of classroom routines and develop supports for students to efficiently and safely transition.
- Incorporate a clean-up routine to keep student materials separate and assist with cleaning procedures (make it fun).

Remote:
- Support the development of a morning routine (hygiene tasks, eating breakfast, positive affirmations, etc.).
- Promote consistent daily school and home routines.

Both:
- Discuss the importance of self-care routines and address sleep habits (including consistent bedtimes and wake times) to promote increased participation in activities.

Physical activity

In-person:
- Encourage movement within activities and breaks that follow social distancing guidelines and flexible seating options (ex: activities in the chair or at the desk).

Remote:
- Integrate movement breaks into sessions and educate families on its importance, especially during virtual learning.

Both:
- Teach students animal yoga poses to encourage stretching and physical health.

Self-regulation

In-person:
- Provide calming sensory experiences and support a welcoming classroom environment.

Remote:
- Identify strategies for self-calming or increasing arousal using preferred home materials to promote the just-right level for online participation.
- Support the student and family in designating a home "chill zone" where the student can take a break and self-regulate as needed.

Both:
- Use an energy meter or other visual to teach students how to identify, communicate, and address their regulatory state.

Mental health

Social-emotional skills

In-person:
- Support a calming classroom environment (reduce distractions, try relaxing music, add positive visuals, model and use therapeutic use of self, etc.).
- Create a structured daily check-in system for students to share feelings and challenges (such as a zones of regulation check in or a battery meter to assess their energy level).

Remote:
- Teach emotion identification using concrete visuals, such as an emotion thermometer. Create it in a shared fillable forum or have the student draw it. Encourage daily use with family to create a habit and to foster self-awareness.

Both:
- Read social stories or books. Practice identifying the characters' thoughts and feelings. Discuss how to share our feelings.

Coping strategies

In-person:
- Integrate positive affirmations and deep breathing within classroom routines.
- Develop individualized calming routines, spaces, or strategies for students to self-initiate if they are overwhelmed or upset in the classroom.

Remote:
- Create a calming routine based on sensory preferences and preferred activities in the home (such as squeezing play-doh, rubbing a soft blanket, coloring, yoga, etc.).
- Direct through mindfulness and deep breathing activities. Share the screen with a picture of a favorite place or a soothing video.

Both:
- Identify strategies for students to easily communicate needs to teachers (such as a Zones flip chart or pause sign when they need a break).

Social participation

In-person:
- Communicate clear rules on social distancing expectations and role play examples for the student. Use "expected" vs. "unexpected" language to help frame social rules.
- Create a list of options for socially distanced games students can play at recess or in the classroom. Encourage opportunities for socialization throughout the day.

Remote:
- Support technology management skills and encourage new avenues for social participation, such as group video chats, sending a card to a classmate, writing an email, calling a friend, etc.

Both:
- Facilitate student support groups and participation in meaningful social activities.

Leisure and relaxation

In-person:
- Support teachers in identifying alternative leisure activities for students in consideration of safety guidelines.

Remote:
- Create a choice board for home leisure activities.

Both:
- Promote incorporation of special interests, hobbies, and leisure activities into routines and sessions to reduce stress, provide balance, and promote happiness.

COVID-19

Wearing a mask

In-person:
- Include visual supports within the environment for proper mask use and model rules/expectations.
- Collaborate with teachers to create a classroom partnership pledge.

Remote:
- Discuss the student's typical routines and activities at home. Support understanding of when and how to properly use a mask within these routines.

Both:
- Clearly communicate and model expectations. Encourage use by making it fun (create stories about masks, role play superhero characters, decorate masks, etc.).
- Identify alternative strategies for students experiencing difficulty with putting on/taking off or wearing a mask.

Social distancing

In-person:
- Modify the classroom or school environment through initial set-up and use of visuals.
- Provide opportunities for students to practice measuring distance and staying 6 feet from others in the classroom (play games and incorporate social skills).

Remote:
- Support families with teaching COVID-19 precautions and social distancing rules to students. To make it fun, families can play Bubble Up when in the community. When passing or near others, say, "Bubble Up!" and the family huddles together.

Both:
- Explain social distancing to students through videos, games, or measurement activities to increased understanding of distance.

Practitioners should refer to and adhere to the safety and health guidance provided by the NC DHHS Strong Schools and NC DPI Lighting our Way Forward documents.

Handwashing

In-person:
- Utilize visuals, peer-modeling, or video-modeling to teach handwashing techniques.
- Implement engaging activities to make hand washing fun.

Remote:
- Teach the importance of reducing the spread of germs and encourage practice based on the students' home routines and activities.

Both:
- Discuss expectations for when to wash hands and how often.
- Incorporate frequent opportunities to practice and visualize prepositions (top, between, together) and thoroughness.

Interoception

In-person:
- Integrate interoception lessons and "self-check" routines in the classroom for students to increase self-awareness of their body and feelings. Read social stories to explain why it is important to pay attention to our bodies during COVID-19.

Remote:
- Use mindfulness and body-scan visualization strategies during virtual sessions (such as having the student scan to assess body positioning at the home workstation and identifying how their body and mind is feeling).

Both:
- Teach students how to describe and communicate feelings.
- Create matching games for identifying physiological symptoms that correspond with emotions (i.e. having a tummy ache, feeling jittery, being sluggish, headaches, etc.).

Practitioners should refer to and adhere to the safety and health guidance provided by the NC DHHS Strong Schools and NC DPI Lighting our Way Forward documents.

Academics

Work and study habits

In-person:
- Use checklists, visuals, or other supports in the classroom for following directions, understanding the role of student and task completion.

Remote:
- Use a virtual timer, editable checklists, or other visual supports during tasks to promote sustained attention and task completion.
- Make recommendations for consistent study habits and structured workspace set-up in the home.

Both:
- Complete task-analyses and break down assignments into small chunks to make workloads more manageable.
- Implement movement breaks and flexible seating options.

Organization

In-person:
- Provide environmental modifications to classroom workstations to support organization and cleaning systems.
- Teach expectations for use of workspace and materials, including boundaries.

Remote:
- Help students and families set up a home work space (for example, a bin for supplies, a bin for assignments, a "finished" bin for completed tasks, and only the materials needed for a task out at a time).

Both:
- Teach students how to use a structured work system or checklist to support organization and time management skills (have them check-off after each task is done to encourage task-completion).

Following a schedule

In-person:
- Create a visual schedule for school activities and incorporate dedicated times for movement, socialization, bathroom breaks, transitions, and handwashing.

Remote:
- Encourage the use of a home schedule for after-school time with positive reinforcements and preferred activities.

Both:
- Promote clear, consistent expectations and routines to reduce feelings of uncertainty and obtain a sense of normalcy.

Technology management

In-person:
- Teach students how to access technology and maintain equipment in preparation for remote learning days and/or access during normal operations.

Remote:
- Teach students about technology social rules, behavioral expectations, and screen time.
- Send students and families video or picture instructions for technology platforms.
- Utilize screen sharing options to teach students how to send an email, search on the internet, practice typing, etc.

Both:
- Teach students technology skills, such as typing, using a mouse, navigating software, and taking care of equipment.

Systems Level

Environmental modifications

In-person:
- Support administration with modifying the school environment, routines, and use of spaces.
- Incorporate visuals and reminders for social distancing (setting up boundaries in the classroom, creating an efficient set up, providing visuals, etc.).
- Provide systems for hallway transitions, such as designating consistent pathways.

Remote:
- Develop and provide school-wide resources to families for ergonomics and proper home workspace set up, including a designated work space (organized, free of clutter, safe).

Both:
- Ensure accessibility of the learning environment and differentiate materials for students based on their unique strengths and needs.

Teacher supports

In-person:
- Conduct task-analyses and provide suggestions for task adaptations to support teachers and students with adhering to precautions and contact guidelines (ex: reducing the need for tactile supports by using scissors to open packages, wearing Velcro shoes, pre-cutting materials, etc.).

Remote:
- Support teachers with identifying strategies for remote instruction, transitioning to an online format and workplace ergonomics.

Both:
- Identify support systems and resources for teachers and staff to prevent burnout and promote positive mental health.
- Incorporate and demonstrate elements of therapeutic use of self in interactions.

Student programming

In-person:

- Conduct a needs assessment using a SWOT analysis (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats) upon return to school to develop strategies or programs which address concerns for certain populations or the school community.

Remote:

- Promote virtual extracurricular opportunities and social groups to support students' engagement and connectivity.

Both:

- Develop school programs and initiatives to support mental health, social emotional learning, and safety (use concepts and strategies from trauma-informed care).
- Integrate Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports.

Occupational justice and equity

In-person:

- Provide support to students and colleagues who are experiencing trauma or inequities during this time. Ensure they feel heard and supported within the school environment.

Remote:

- Evaluate and address barriers which limit engagement in remote learning and meaningful occupations (use interactive technology platforms to promote sustained attention, offer alternative methods of communication for students, add physical activities and movement breaks, incorporate meaningful activities, etc.).

Both:

- Promote system practices that offer students with structured routines, balanced activities, autonomy, opportunities for inclusion, and access to diverse participation.
- Support programs for families in need of resources (ex: food banks, access to technology, classroom learning kits, etc.).
- Provide staff education surrounding occupational justice and equity impacts.
- Advocate for accessible instruction, curriculum, and environment through universal design for learning.
- Reach out to families through multiple mediums to provide education, support and resources.

Transitions

Environments

In-person:
- Modify the school environment to create organized and structured spaces which make students feel secure.
- Position a daily schedule in a visible place in the classroom where students can consistently refer to it throughout the day.

Remote:
- Create clear guidelines and expectations for virtual participation, such as strategies to communicate needs and explicit directions for appropriate behaviors.

Both:
- Provide individualized supports to prepare and acclimate students who are transitioning to new schools, new grade levels or teachers, between remote and in-person classes, etc.
- Support students in modifying their routines and habits as they adjust from their summer schedule or between in-person/remote learning.

Tasks

In-person:
- Incorporate multiple forms of communicating task directions and expectations, such as written, visual, modeling, etc.
- Scaffold assignments and activities to gradually acclimate students to new academic expectations and task demands.

Remote:
- Modify tasks to reduce the need for excessive materials and resources in the home.
- Provide multiple means of access for task directions and expectations.

Both:
- Make academic routines and task expectations as consistent and clear as possible.
- Simplify task demands and focus on providing moments of success as frequently as possible.

Post-secondary transition

In-person:
- Incorporate daily living skills and jobs in classroom roles and routines, such as cleaning and organizing materials, being the classroom leader for the day, etc.

Remote:
- Ensure students are maintaining healthy daily living habits and teach necessary skills, such as eating proper meals, taking care of hygiene, managing household tasks, etc. Taking care of health and the home environment is important for successful remote learning.

Both:
- Support individualized vocational goals and identify ways for students to practice vocational skills in the school, home or community while social distancing.
- Discuss the school as a community, including what it means to be a good citizen and contribute to the school community.

Self determination

In-person:
- Involve students in decisions about lessons and the classroom environment, seek their input on what makes them feel the most comfortable and safe.

Remote:
- Allow students to self-identify when they need to take breaks during virtual sessions (create a system for how they can request a break and how long the break can last).

Both:
- Support students with self-advocating and communicating needs during challenging situations.
- Create opportunities for students to discuss their strengths, make choices, and set goals to encourage autonomy and help them feel in control during this time.
- Discuss challenges and problem-solve solutions.