For preschoolers and infants, occupational therapy is concerned with a child's ability to participate in daily life activities or “occupations.” An occupational therapist (OT) may play an important role in an early intervention or special education services program for a child.

According to the American Occupational Therapy Association (AOTA), occupational therapies may be used to treat children with birth injuries or birth defects, sensory processing/integrative disorders, traumatic injuries (brain or spinal cord), learning problems, autism and pervasive developmental disorders, mental health or behavioral problems, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and other developmental delays caused by injury, illness or other disorders. OTs may also be called on to provide therapies to parents and other caregivers experiencing difficulties caring for a child with developmental disorders, using coping strategies and encouraging healthy lifestyles choices such as exercise, hobbies or group or individual therapies.

According to the AOTA, OT therapies for children with developmental delays caused by mental disorders focus on paying attention to task behaviors, practicing delayed gratification, expressing feelings to others in appropriate manner, selecting and engaging in leisure activities appropriately with peers, complying with school rules and practicing self-regulation as appropriate for the child's age. The OT may also recommend and teach a child to use adaptive equipment, such as wheelchairs, bathing equipment, dressing devices or communication aids.

Children with developmental delays may experience problems with handwriting. An OT may be called upon as part of a comprehensive early treatment program to help a child practice and learn the fine motor skills needed for proper writing. These therapies may include posture and positioning practice, play therapies to help children strengthen muscles and improve coordination and, often in coordination with an education professional, handwriting evaluations and curriculum recommendation and implementation.
An OT may also recommend toys and play activities that promote healthy development and provide stimulation to the child. As part of a therapy program, an OT may help a child learn or recommend parents encourage the following types of play activities as defined and described by the AOTA:
- Exploratory play using balls, sand and water toys, slides, swings, finger paints and magnets. During exploratory play, children use their senses as they explore, discover, examine and organize their activities.
- Directed manipulative play that asks a child to perform a task, such as stacking cereal boxes, slipping coins into a piggy bank, playing with a deck of cards or playing with items such as puzzles, pegboards, beads or lacing cards. Manipulative play tests a child’s eye and hand coordination and dexterity.
- Imaginative or symbolic play that includes role-playing, playing with dolls and stuffed animals, toy furniture and telephones. This type of pretend play encourages good social skills and a positive self-image.

As an example of how OTs use various techniques to treat specific disorders, an OT may evaluate a child with ADHD at home and school to determine how the disorder is affecting the child's ability to perform assignments and participate in the home environment. According to the AOTA, an OT may recommend a program that addresses the physical, behavioral and emotional effects of ADHD and identifies goals to help the child succeed. Specific techniques include using the intervention of sensory integration to modify the environment to decrease noise and distractions and helping the child with appropriate social skills.

For children with autism or pervasive developmental disorders, occupational therapy can help children to develop appropriate social, play and learning skills. According to the AOTA, an OT may aid an autistic child in achieving and maintaining normal daily tasks such as getting dressed, teeth brushing or playing with other children. The OT accomplishes this through therapies that help a child appropriately respond to information coming through the senses. These therapies may include developmental activities, sensory integration and play activities that aid a child in interacting and communicating with others.

For more information on the types of disorders that may be treated with occupational therapies, see the AOTA children and youth's “Tips for living” web site at http://www.aota.org/Consumers/Tips/Youth.aspx and children and youth fact sheet Web site at: http://www.aota.org/Consumers/WhatisOT/CY.aspx.
For more information on the occupational therapists’ role in treating developmental disorders in children, see the article “What is Occupational Therapy?” at http://kidshealth.org/parent/system/ill/occupational_therapy.html.

On the AOTA Web site’s podcast page, parents can listen to an episode on the role of occupational therapy in autism intervention at http://www.aota.org/Consumers/Podcasts.aspx.