



Physical Therapy and Occupational Therapy - Does My Child Need It?

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You're the coach of a children's soccer team. Some of the players are natural athletes - they perform all the skills with ease. They are the stars of the team. Most of the team has average skill and ability. You also have one or two children who have difficulty with all the soccer skills. When they run, they look - awkward. When they kick the ball, they often miss completely or kick with very little strength. They trip over their own feet.

You try everything to help develop their skills. They practice skills over and over again. You teach the skills in different ways. You give encouragement and praise. Nothing seems to work.

Children like these are often described as being clumsy or uncoordinated. They may have poor balance, and the acquisition of physical skills doesn't come easily. There may be medical reasons at the root of these difficulties, but how do you know?

One of the things you can do to find out is talk to a physical or occupational therapist. We often assume that you only go to these therapists after an injury or when recovering from surgery or when diagnosed with a medical condition. This is not always the case. Physical and occupational therapists also have expertise in child development. They can identify when a child's development is within the wide range of typical and when it is not. A brief conversation with a therapist can often identify whether a standard assessment is needed.

There are a variety of assessment tools that therapists use depending on what areas of need are identified and the age of the child. But what do they assess? Physical therapists look at the large muscle movements of a child. They look at how a child moves from place to place and from position to position. Physical therapists are interested in such things as muscle strength and tone. They look at balance, stability, and coordination.

Occupational therapists look at many of the same things, but from a slightly different angle. The occupational therapist looks at fine motor skills; how a child manipulates objects, and graphic skills like drawing, printing and writing. They also look at how a child uses his or her senses and how the child interprets that sensory information. Occupational therapists look at a child's concept development in areas such as colour, shape and size. Both the physical and occupational therapist look at motor planning - the ability to put movements together in the right sequence to perform a skill or task. Something highly developed in gymnasts!

How does this relate to those children on the soccer field? The child that seems awkward when running may have balance or motor planning difficulties. The "clumsy" child who trips and falls a lot may have issues with coordination. The child who can't kick the ball may have sensory difficulties or low muscle tone or strength.

Therapists may recommend individual or group therapy or they may simply suggest strategies to help improve skills. Therapy does not have to feel like therapy, the use of balls, swings, crayons, scissors, and balance beams can make it seem like play. Organizations like Renfrew Educational Services, offer assessment and therapy as well as specialized programs like that can improve skills in fun creative ways.

Improved motor skills can make a huge difference in a child's life!



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