

OCCUPATIONAL THERAPY IN THE NEWS

OT and Parenting

Occupational therapist finds patience works

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By Carlos Alcalá, *The Sacramento Bee*

Patti Watters' job taught her the patience it takes to be a good parent. She has been an occupational therapist in institutions and private homes for nearly 30 years and teaches OT, as it is called, at Sacramento City College.

She also has three kids now in their 20s: Kyle, Cody and Karly.

Despite the name, occupational therapy is not about careers. Watters and others like her help people — people with some form of disability — do many of the everyday tasks others take for granted.

Watters recalls one man who was a quadruple amputee — he had lost both arms and both legs. He was depressed but still wanted to do basic things for himself — feed himself, clean himself. Before that, though, he had to be able to put on his own prosthetic arms. Watters struggled to teach him how to do that.

The patience it requires — and the patience a parent needs — isn't just a matter of keeping one's temper or not allowing frustration to boil over. Patience sometimes means not doing something for someone, even when it's hard to see them struggle.

She could've fed the man or put on his prosthetics. It would've been easier, but it wasn't what he needed. The same is true for children.

"It's knowing when to intervene," she said, "not just tie shoes for them because it was quicker to get out the door."

Both kids and patients need encouragement, too. "Encourage and praise them for what a good job they did," Watters said. Even, she said, "when they're pouring juice and they spill. Teaching them to pour their own juice is a great bi-manual activity."

She had an aha! moment on patience long ago. "Sometimes I would come home very tired, she recalled. "I asked myself, 'How could I have patience all day with my patients and lose it with my kids?' She reminded herself to apply it at home.

Ada Boone Hoerl, OT program coordinator at City College, said children of therapists get a "lifetime of therapy."

Watters said her work didn't just teach her to let kids do it for themselves, it also helped her realize when they weren't ready to do something. She and her husband, Pat, were tempted to enroll their oldest son in school early, though he would have been just 4. He was bright and ready to read, but school is not just about brains. The couple decided to have someone evaluate Kyle's readiness — and discovered this motor skills weren't yet ready for school. The Watters held Kyle back a year. It seems not to have hurt him. Today he's a doctoral student in astrophysics at Stanford.

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