

OCCUPATIONAL THERAPY OTAC IN THE COMMUNITY

Serving Homeless Families

Excerpt from:

Developing Client-centered Goals for Homeless Families

by Winifred Schultz-Krohn, PhD, OTR/L, BCP, FAOTA

Dr. Schultz-Krohn is an advanced OT practitioner with great expertise in occupational therapy with the homeless population having published extensively on this topic as well as being involved with ongoing research and services at a homeless shelter.

The provision of occupational therapy services for those who are homeless has been advocated by a variety of well-respected occupational therapists -- the homeless have occupational needs that are unmet and this population is underserved by the profession of occupational therapy. The implementation of occupational therapy services for homeless families requires understanding the unique occupational needs of this group including homeless children/teenagers, homeless parents and homeless families as a whole.

When compared to the middle income population, those who are homeless have:

- Higher incidence of health issues including physical and psychosocial issues
- Less education impacting on job flexibility
- Higher incidence of exposure to violence and abuse
- Higher incidence of learning disabilities
- High frequency of living doubled-up for a period of time.

Those who are homeless often experience a sense of marginalization from the community and social supports are often severely disrupted or severe. The sense of engaging in occupations within a larger context is often denied.

Occupational therapy is uniquely positioned to support homeless families. The Occupational Therapy Practice Framework, 2nd ed. articulates the need for the profession to focus on "promoting health and participation of people ... through engagement in occupation". The foundation of occupational therapy services provided for those who are homeless is



VISION STATEMENT:

A world where all people participate in meaningful occupations to optimize their life experience.

MISSION STATEMENT:

OTAC is the collective voice that serves, promotes, and supports the profession of occupational therapy and its practitioners.



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guided by two basic principles:

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1. Creating an affirming environment that validates skill development can support participation in occupations, and
2. Participation in occupation can buffer the negative effects of stress and loss.

Services designed for homeless families reflect an understanding of the concepts of occupational justice which include the following:

- Enablement of fairness and equal opportunity
- No discrimination based on ability, age or other factors
- Social commitment to universal design and accessibility
- Enabling everyone to flourish individually and as members of a community.

Homeless families regularly experience occupational injustice where engaging in meaningful occupations has been severely limited or eliminated. Occupational therapy services should provide homeless families with an opportunity to engage in meaningful occupations and develop the skills needed to extricate themselves from homelessness. Services such as financial management, problem solving and organizational skills for parents have been provided to help them seek housing while living in a shelter. Children and teens have benefited from individual and group occupational therapy services designed to support educational and leisure pursuits. The integrity of the family has been supported through family game nights at the shelter. These are only a few examples of the occupational therapy services provided to homeless families. There is a great need for occupational therapy practitioners to consider how services can be extended to this underserved group.

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References for this article are available through OTAC.

Dr. Winifred Schultz-Krohn received the OTAC Award of Excellence at its Annual Conference in October 2008. This award recognizes a member of OTAC who has made significant contributions to the advancement of occupational therapy in the areas of therapeutic practice, education, research, administration, and organizational and community service. Dr. Schultz-Krohn is a master clinician whose clinical expertise is demonstrated in a wide range of practice arenas from children in a pediatric outpatient clinic to adults, adolescents and children in a homeless shelter. She is widely recognized as a resource person and is extremely knowledgeable about occupational therapy practice. In addition to being a full-time professor at San Jose State University, she is a skilled and well-respected clinician in the San Francisco Bay Area.