



Building Trauma-Informed Communities: The Effect of Occupational Therapy in the Pre-Adoptive Phase

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Introduction

- There are over 400,000 children in the United States residing in foster care each year, resulting in a precarious disruption for the child (Smith et al., 2022).
- The most common reasons a child is removed from their birth family are due to parental neglect, drug abuse by parent, caretaker inability to cope, and physical abuse (Lynch et al., AOTA Press).
- Due to the implications of trauma on the brain, children in foster care often presents with maladaptive behaviors, challenging the stability of secure placement within an adoptive home.
- Issues surrounding secure placement do not stem from the mere fact of a child’s physical, emotional, or social deficits--but from the lack of education prospective adoptive families’ have to become trauma-informed and trauma-responsive for the child to help mitigate the effects trauma while inherently improving the quality of their relationship.
- The purpose of this capstone project is to convey the benefits of integrating occupational therapy to the adoption agency team to achieve a multidisciplinary approach for best practice to yield better outcomes for adoption across the span.

Methods

- OTD student evaluated the “Trauma-Informed Partnering for Permanence- Model Approach to Partnerships in Parenting (TIPS-MAPP)” training course led by a trained social worker and post adoptive parent and gained further knowledge of the program material after attending and observing the 11-week long course that is held once per week for 3 hours.
- The student completed a full evaluation through conduction of an in depth-needs assessment through interviews with staff. Their perceptions included the strengths and weakness of the program and were noted to help structure the content of the project for quality program improvements in the future.
- OTS gathered evidenced-based research to support the development of the project deliverable.
- Those who successfully completed and graduated from the TIPS-MAPP training classes were participants in the capstone project and participation was fully voluntary.
- The objective of this project was to advocate for the role of occupational therapy services within this setting through educating skilled professionals (i.e., social workers) and prospective adoptive families about the general implications of childhood trauma on occupational performance to increase their knowledge and understanding to improve preparation and competency as new adoptive parent (s).

Results

- A resource was developed for Children’s Aid Society to provide prospective adoptive parents with and entails the information presented in **Chart 1**, **Table 2** and **Figure 1.1** include the outcome feedback given from staff and prospective adoptive families.

Results (continued)

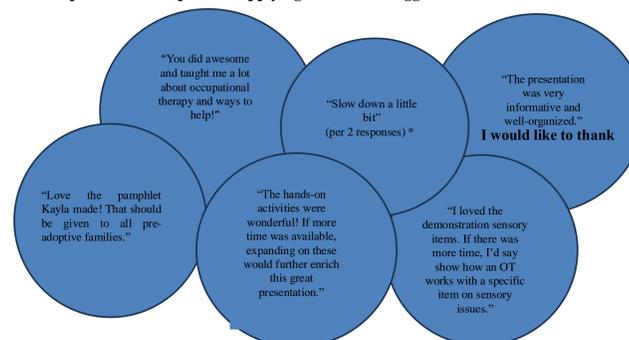
Chart 1: Final Deliverable Topics

Primary Objectives Covered:	OT Role:
General Definition of Occupational Therapy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> o Goal is intended to improve the way an individual, population, and/or group participates or engages in everyday activities.
1. OT’s Role in Trauma	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> o Uses a trauma-informed approach by addressing the physical, emotional, and psychological impact trauma has on occupational performance.
1. The OT Process (e.g., Models and Theory Application)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Models: Neurosequential Model of Treatment (NMT); Attachment, Self-Regulation, and Competence (ARC) • Theories: Person, Environment, Occupation (PEO) Model; Model of Human Occupation (MOHO); Kawa River
1. Overview of Common Trauma-Related Medical Diagnoses treated by OTs in the Foster/Adoptive Care Setting.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) • Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) • Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) • Oppositional Defiant Disorder (ODD) vs. Conduct Disorder (CD)
1. OT Intervention Approaches (related to the mentioned diagnoses)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sensory Integration and Sensory Strategies • Social Skills Training • Executive Functioning Skills Development • Motor Coordination and Fine Motor Skills Training • Sleep and Relaxation Strategies • Activity-Based Interventions • Environmental Modifications • Collaborative Problem Solving with other Professionals (i.e., social workers, teachers, caregivers)
1. Referrals to Trauma-Sensitive OT Clinics (Website and Contact Information)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Foster and Adoption Clinic • Blooms Pediatric Therapy • Able Me OT

Table 2: Post Survey Questions

Survey Question	Participant Responses	Frequency	Themes
How confident do you feel in your understanding of the role of occupational therapy in trauma?	Very Confident	9 responses	Increased confidence and preparedness to meet the needs of a child who has experienced complex trauma.
	Confident	2 responses	Enhanced knowledge and awareness about the role of OT.
Would you find it beneficial to integrate the role of OT within this setting?	Yes	11 responses	Highlights the perceived need for occupational therapy within the pre-adoptive phase of adoption.

Figure 1.1: Open-Ended Responses Supplying Additional Suggestions and Comments



Discussion

- The three main themes that emerged from their responses highlighted 1) The Importance of Multidisciplinary Approach 2) Enhanced Confidence to Parent 3) The Perceived Need for OT in the Pre-Adoptive Phase of Adoption
- The integration of social workers and occupational therapists into a cohesive team provides a holistic basis for addressing the multifaceted needs of children transitioning out of foster care, which is crucial in the context of trauma-informed care.
- The presentation provided a clear overview of OT’s role and based on the open-ended feedback provided, incorporating hands-on materials like the sensory bin, fidget toys, and interoception activity cards during the presentation allowed participants to understand the value in occupational therapy interventions by visualizing and engaging with practical tools they could use in their own home and contributed to their enhanced confidence as indicated by the survey results.
- All participants in the survey agreed that integrating OT into the pre-adoptive phase would be beneficial and the response reflects a growing recognition of the importance of educating prospective families about OT and their interventions approaches early within the adoption process to ensure families initiate the mitigation of potential risks for retraumatization and confidently address trauma-related barriers
- The occupational therapy student was permitted one, 15-20 minute session to present the materials which limited the extent to which OT’s role in trauma could be fully explored and potentially affected prospective families conceptualization of the material presented.
- More in-depth sessions and an extended amount of time to present could have provided a deeper understanding of how OT can specifically address trauma-related needs.
- Future research in this area could build on these findings to explore the long-term effectiveness of OT interventions for children in the adoption process, particularly in terms of outcomes related to attachment, emotional regulation, and social functioning.

Conclusion

- The integration of occupational therapy into the adoption process, particularly in the pre-adoptive phase, holds a significant promise for improving outcomes for children with trauma histories and enhancing the confidence of prospective adoptive families, youth to increase their self-efficacy and transition planning to help them successfully become independent adults
- The findings from this project deliverable emphasize the importance of a multidisciplinary approach, increased education for prospective adoptive families, and early intervention to address trauma-related challenges
- Although this project is limited by sample size and timing constraints, it contributes to the growing body of research advocating for OT’s critical role in trauma-informed adoption services .

References

Lynch, A., Ashcraft, R., & Tekell, L. (Eds.).(2021). *Trauma, occupation, and participation: Foundations and population considerations in occupational therapy*. AOTA Press.

Smith, M. N. (2022). Occupational therapy’s role in the foster care system. *The Open Journal of Occupational Therapy*, 10(1), 1–6. <https://doi.org/10.15453/2168-6408.1850>

Acknowledgement & Contact information

- I would like to give a special thank you to Mrs. Rachel Ascraft, Mrs. Caron Sandefur, Jem Lamb, and Children’s Aid Society.
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