



COT/ BAOT Briefings

Occupational Therapists and Sensory Integration

Publication Date: September 2006

Lead Group: Practice

Review Date: March 2008

*This briefing should be read in conjunction with:
Briefing 14 – Extended Scope Practice
Briefing 22 – Competencies in Occupational Therapy
Briefing 23 – Definitions and Core Skills for Occupational Therapy*

Introduction

The College of Occupational Therapists (COT) receives many requests for information on sensory integration and sensory integration practitioners from education authorities, employers, parents, carers, occupational therapists and other services users. This briefing aims to clarify how sensory integration relates to occupational therapy practice.

What is Sensory Integration?

Sensory integration refers to both a neurological process and a theory of the relationship between the neurological process and behaviour. This was described as 'the organisation of sensory input for use'. (Ayres A.J. 1979).

Miller, Lane et al in 2000 proposed the use of sensory integration in several different contexts. They regarded sensory integration as both a theory and an intervention, referring to this as a neural process, a behavioural process and a clinical frame of reference

The Sensory Integration Network for UK & Ireland in 2003, described sensory integration as 'the ability to take in, sort out, process and make use of information from the world about us. It allows us to make an appropriate adaptive response to meet the demands of the environment. Information about one's own body and world is gathered from the senses. Sensory experiences include touch, movement, body awareness, sight, sound and the pull of gravity. This sensory information goes to the brain, where it is organised and interpreted. As a result, an adaptive plan of action can be carried out in response e.g. a feather tickles your hand, so you brush it off. It is hypothesised that the higher levels of the brain (cerebral cortex) will work more effectively if the lower levels (brain stem) sort out sensory information accurately. This processing of sensory information is called sensory integration'.



How is Sensory Integration used?

Sensory integration is used mainly (but not exclusively) with children. The Sensory Integration Network explains that sensory integration involves treating a child using controlled sensory input and that in a sensory integration session, the child is guided through activities that challenge his or her ability to respond appropriately to sensory input. It also clarifies that training in specific skills is not the focus of a sensory integration session.

The Sensory Integration Network further explains that sensory integration is usually conducted on a one-to-one basis (but may also be used for group work) with the duration of the therapy ranging from 3 months to 2 years, depending on the resources of the service providers and the needs of the child and family. This is delivered through weekly one-hour sessions. Treatment may also involve consultation with parents and teaching staff to advise on activities for home and school.

The aim of the Sensory Integration Network is to promote education, good practice and research in sensory integration theory and practice in the UK & Ireland. It has produced a useful information booklet as a resource for parents and therapists. The information about Sensory Integration in this briefing is based on the guidance issued in its booklet (Cribbins V et al, 2003)

Who can use Sensory Integration?

Sensory integration training is not part of the core curriculum for occupational therapy. (COT, 2004a). Occupational therapists graduating from pre registration programmes are not deemed to be competent sensory integration practitioners. The College of Occupational Therapists advises all occupational therapists to only provide services and use techniques for which they are qualified by education, training and/or experience and that are within their competence (COT, (2005).

Occupational therapists seeking to practice in an area such as sensory integration must ensure that they are competent to do so. Occupational therapists who undertake recognised and appropriate training in sensory integration in order to use this in their work, do so as extended scope practitioners.

Individuals and organisations seeking occupational therapists to provide sensory integration services must ensure that these occupational therapists have the recognised training in addition to their qualification in occupational therapy to enable them to be competent sensory integration practitioners.

The Sensory Integration Network recommends that any therapist using Sensory Integration should be an occupational therapist, physiotherapist or speech and language therapist who has received accredited postgraduate training in sensory integration theory and treatment and who has pursued continued education in this area.

How does Sensory Integration relate to Occupational Therapy Practice?

Occupational therapy enables people to achieve health, well-being, and life satisfaction through participation in occupation (COT, 2004). Occupation is accepted as the daily activities that reflect cultural values, provide structure to living and meaning to individuals; these activities meet human needs for self care, enjoyment and participation in society (Crepeau E et al, 2003)



Core skills are the expert knowledge and abilities that are shared by all occupational therapists, irrespective of their field or level of practice. The core skills of occupational therapists are built along occupation and activity.

Occupational therapists identify functional goals to achieve clinical efficacy following assessments of their clients. Occupational therapists have a choice of treatment approaches available to them to achieve these goals. These treatment approaches are based on their core skills training e.g. activity analysis. Occupational therapists are also able to use sensory approaches in their treatment e.g. touch, sensory perception. These are part of their core skills and should not be confused with Sensory Integration.

Occupational therapists may, however, also use other media that are not part of their core skills when these approaches form part of the overall treatment plan. If so, the occupational therapists involved are required to undertake further training to ensure their competence and the health and safety of their clients.

Sensory Integration is not part of the defined core skills of occupational therapists therefore the use of Sensory Integration is regarded as extended scope practice. (See COT/BAOT Briefing 14 Extended Scope Practice).

Further information on Sensory Integration can be obtained from:

The Sensory Integration Network (UK & Ireland)
c/o 26 Leopardstown Grove
County Dublin
Ireland
Email: info@sensoryintegration.org.uk

Websites:

Sensory Integration Network

Summary: UK and Ireland group promoting the development of sensory integration theory and practice.

Homepage: www.sensoryintegration.org.uk (Accessed 1st August 2006)

Sensory Processing Disorder Network

Summary: US-based group providing information and resources for parents, professionals and others on sensory processing disorder.

Homepage: www.sinetwork.org

References and Further Reading:

Ayres J (1979). *Sensory integration and the child*. Los Angeles: Western Psychological Services.

Bundy A, Shelly L, Murray E (2002) *Sensory integration – theory and practice*. 2nd ed. Philadelphia: FA Davis Company.

College of Occupational Therapists (2005) *Code of ethics and professional conduct for occupational therapists*. London: COT.



College of Occupational Therapists (2004) *The College of Occupational Therapists framework for pre-registration education*. London: COT.

College of Occupational Therapists (2004) *COT/BAOT Briefings – Competencies in occupational therapy Practice*. London: COT.

College of Occupational Therapists (2004) *COT/BAOT Briefings – Definitions and core skills for occupational therapy*. London: COT.

College of Occupational Therapists (2004) *COT/BAOT Briefings – Extended scope practice*
London: COT.

Cribbin V, Lynch H, Bagshawe B, (2003) *Sensory integration information booklet – a resource for parents and therapists*. Dublin: Sensory Integration Network.

Crepeau E, Cohen E, Schell B (2003) *Willard and Spackman's occupational therapy*. 10th ed. Philadelphia: Lippincott, Williams, & Wilkins.

Miller LJ, Lane SJ (2000) Towards a consensus in terminology in sensory integration theory and practice. *Sensory Integration Special Interest Section Quarterly, AOTA Vol 23*, 1.

Acknowledgements

With thanks to the College of Occupational Therapists Specialist Section – Children, Young People and Families and Dido Green, Clinical Expert Occupational Therapist in Paediatric Neurosciences.