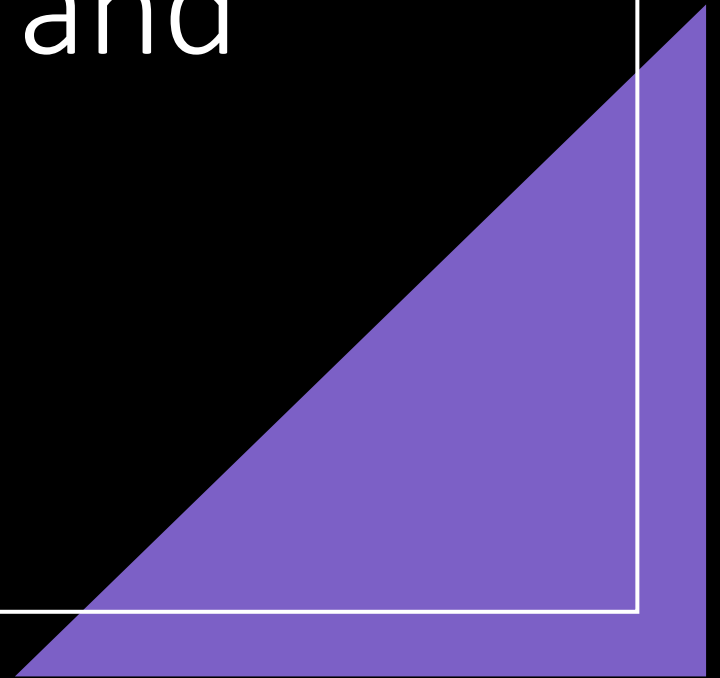


# Occupational Therapy's Role in Supporting Children's Grief: Tools, Sensory Strategies, and When to Refer

Michelle Michaels, OTDS



# About Me

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Michelle Michaels is an occupational therapy doctoral student at Huntington University, who is completing her capstone experience project while collaborating with the National Alliance for Children's Grief (NACG). She is extremely passionate about her project working with the NACG due to her personal experiences with childhood grief following the death of her mother. She also has ten years of experience working with children with and without disabilities as a care provider, direct support professional, and a personal paraprofessional aid. She gained occupational therapy clinical experience through her Level II Fieldwork placement at an outpatient pediatric clinic that utilized a sensory-based approach. Once she has passed the NBCOT exam following graduation in April, she plans to go into travel occupational therapy.



# Learning Objectives

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1

Participants will be able to describe occupational therapy and how it can benefit children experiencing grief

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2

Participants will be able to identify 2 occupational therapy mental health strategies/tools that can be utilized in a clinic or at home.

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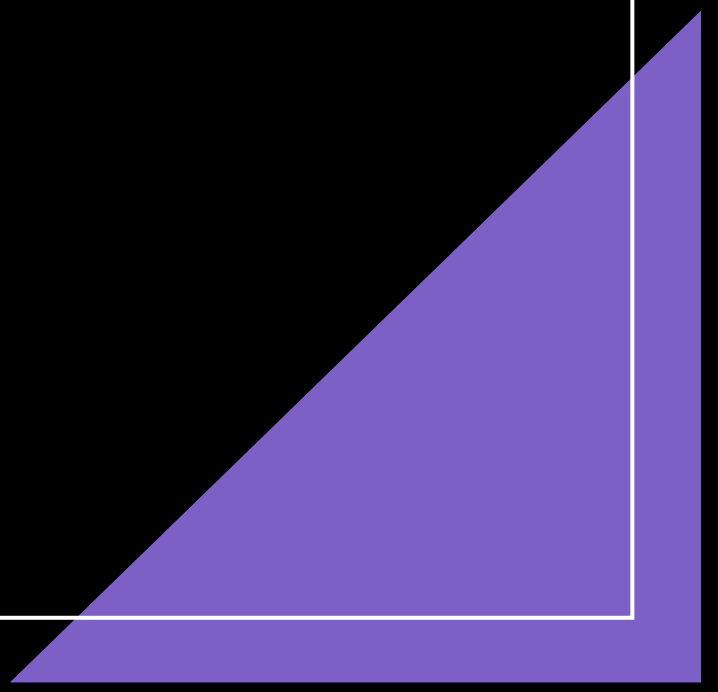
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3

Participants will be able to recognize when to refer a child experiencing grief to occupational therapy services.

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# Occupational Therapy

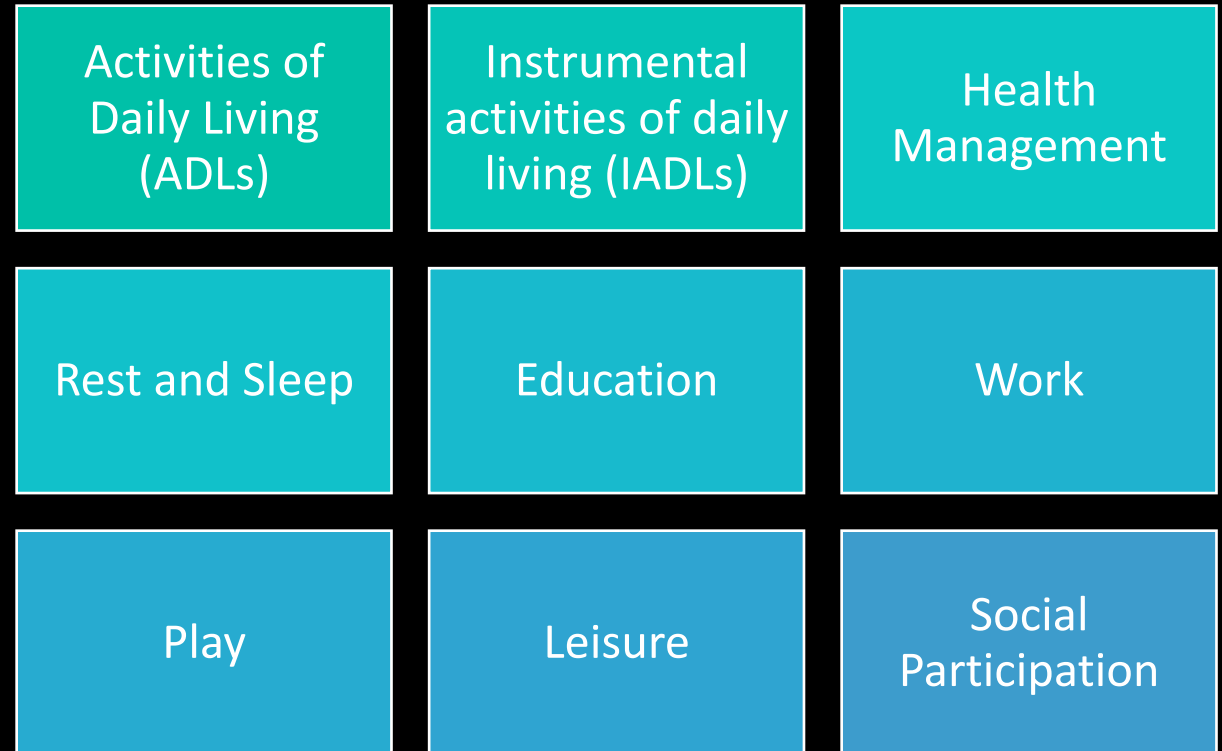


# Definitions

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- **Occupational Therapy**: “the therapeutic use of everyday life occupations with persons, groups, or populations for the purpose of enhancing or enabling participation” (AOTA, 2020, p.1)
- **Occupations**: “the everyday activities that people do as individuals, in families, and with communities to occupy time and bring meaning and purpose to life. Occupations include things people need to, want to and are expected to do” (AOTA, 2020, p.7).

# Occupations



# Occupational Therapy Practice Settings

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- Occupational therapists are in various settings such as hospitals, clinics, schools, industry, homes, communities (AOTA, 2020 p.18)
- Best Practice Settings for Children Experiencing Grief depending on child's needs
  - Mental Health
  - Outpatient Pediatrics
  - School-based
  - Community-based

# Effects of Grief and Trauma on Children and Adolescents

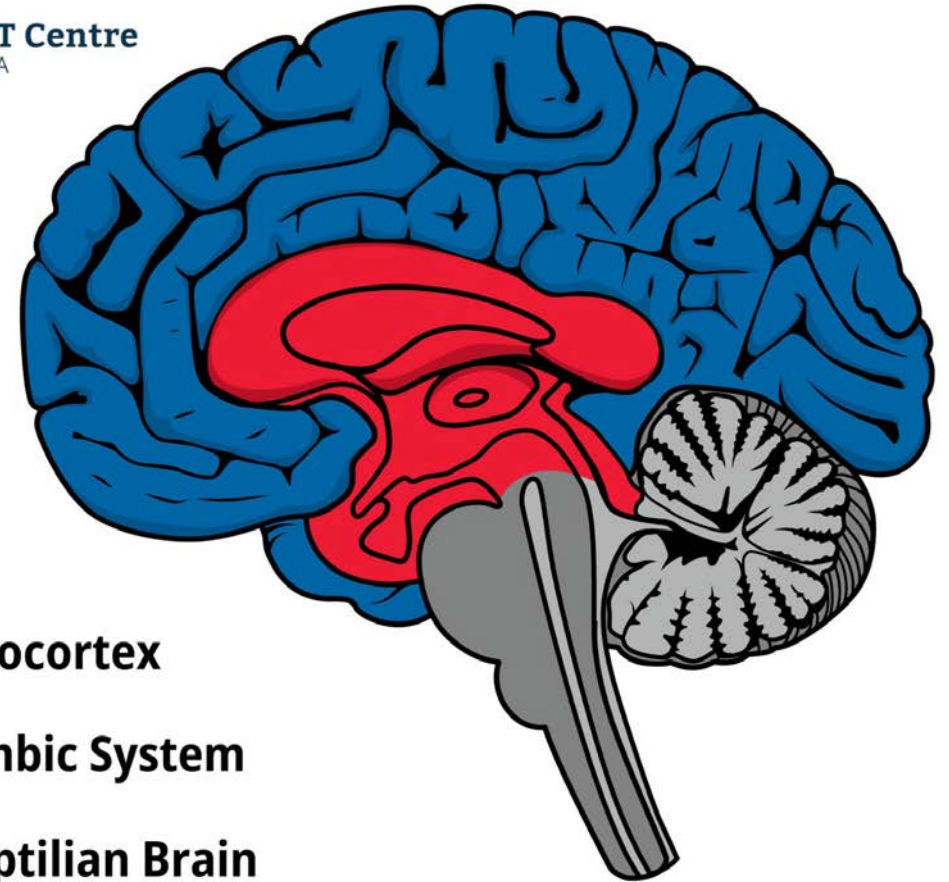
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- Physical
  - Can affect long term physiological changes, sensory dysregulation
- Emotional
- Behavioral
- Cognitive
  - Can affect development or regression of previously mastered skills
- Social
- Spiritual



# Let's look at the Brain

The MEHRIT Centre  
SELF-REG.CA



- Neocortex
- Limbic System
- Reptilian Brain

Adapted by The MEHRIT Centre from Paul MacLean's 1960s Triune Brain Model

# What occupational therapists can help with

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- Developmental skills
- Self-regulation skills
- Cognitive skills
- Emotional regulation
- Social participation skills
- Physical/Physiological changes that happen with grief
- Modifying environments
- Routine management
- Transitions assistance

# Occupational Therapy Mental Health Strategies and Tools



# Start With The Basics

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- Sleep
  - Things to try at home:
    - Wind down time, Sleep Mode, lighting, white noise machines, weighted blankets, essential oils, or creating a structured nighttime routine
- Nutrition
  - Things to try:
    - Consistent sit down mealtime with family, cooking in clinic nights for children and family
- Hydration
  - Allow and encourage water bottles in clinic settings, schools, and everywhere!

# Add movement to Activities



Physical activity can be added to all ages and is important for self-regulation, mental and physical health.



Physical activity could also help improve endurance, gross motor skills, and sensory regulation!



Fun Fact: When any body is inactive for 20 minutes or more, there is a decline in neural communication!

# Sensory Strategies

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- Disclaimer: Not all sensory strategies will work for every child. Even if a sensory strategy works one day, it may not work the next.
- Start each session with an activity to engage the sensory systems and help with self-regulation to help improve participation.
  - Playing a game with physical activity, swings, parachute activity, ball pit, or a volcano room
- Physical activity or heavy work can also help improve sensory regulation and help with transitions
  - Animal walks, pushing a weighted bucket with materials for an activity

# Recommendations for Clinics

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- Having various sensory equipment throughout the clinic that engage all different sensory systems
  - Refer to handout for options to engage all sensory systems
- Sensory Equipment Recommendations:
  - Fidget boxes in each room
  - Weighted lap animals, blankets
  - Wiggle seats, bean bag chair, rocker chairs
  - Fun Walls: murals, sensory walls, chalkboard walls, rock wall
  - Various lighting in each room
  - Calming room/safe space



# ACTIVITY ALERT: Bubble Mountain

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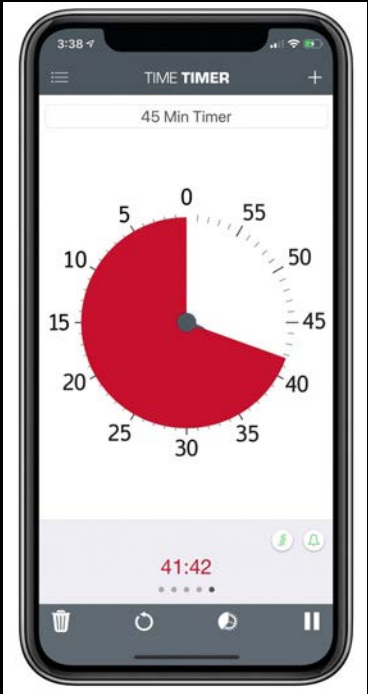


- Bubble Mountain is a calming sensory activity that can be done anywhere!
- Equipment:
  - Large Bowl, hand/dish soap, and a straw
- Instructions:
  - Fill up the bowl about halfway with water
  - Add hand/dish soap to bowl
  - Take large and long deep breaths through the straw to blow up the bubbles. Have the child blow until bubbles are at their head level!

Don't worry if they drink the soapy water, its not toxic!



# Help with Transitions



- Be creative and make switching activities/rooms into a game!
  - Animal walks, follow the leader
- Strategies:
  - Visual Aids are extremely helpful for children!
    - Write out schedule for the day, have a visual timer so children can see how much time they have to do an activity.
    - Repeating instructions or time left in activity
    - Providing 2 concrete choices to pick from
- Free App: Time Timer



# Activities to try: YOGA!

- Yoga improves your physical health, but did you know that it is also a mindfulness activity, can help improve sensory regulation, and can help improve digestion?
- **Adolescents:** peer lead groups, Yoga Dice, Twister, Aerial Yoga
- **Fun ways to incorporate:** Yoga Dice, Yogi Says, Musical Mats, Hot Lava Yoga Game, Follow the Leader, Guess the Pose
- Equipment for Clinic
  - Yoga or padded mats, Yoga Dice
- YouTube Videos: Cosmic Kids Yoga
  - <https://www.youtube.com/@CosmicKidsYoga>

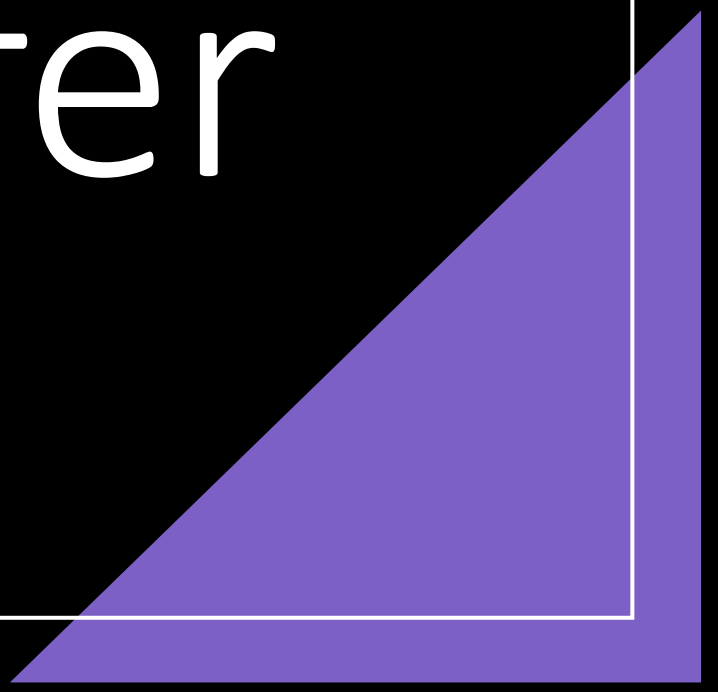


# Apps that May Help

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- General Mental Health Apps for Younger Children:
  - Mindshift, Headspace, Smart Tales – STEM learning, Smiling Mind, Breathe, Think, Do with Sesame, Calm, Mindful Powers, Children’s Bedtime Meditations, For Me, The Zones of Regulation
- General Mental Health Apps for Adolescents/Young Adults
  - Calm, Headspace, Simple Habits, The Mindfulness App, Glo | Yoga and Meditation, Core Meditation, Insite Timer, Waking Up
  - More Tailored Apps include: EXHALE (BIWOC Focused); SowImate (LGBTQ+ Focused); Sattva (Mantra Focused)
- For Sleep:
  - Aura, Calm, Headspace, Sleep Easy, Sleep Reset, BetterSleep Relax Melodies (best for kids)
- Journaling/Reflection:
  - Longwalks, Jour, Daylio, Reflectly, Day One Journal
- Time Timer App

When to Refer



# Important Disclaimers

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- Not all children and adolescents experiencing grief will need occupational therapy services.
- The first professionals that should address grief should be a mental health professional (psychologist, grief specialist) an OT is just another option to help improve performance in occupations. OT's would benefit the MOST while working with mental health professional!
- OT's may refer to other professionals because the child may benefit better from other professionals.
- Not all OT's will treat the same or use the same theories during practice

# When to Refer

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- Noticed a delay in developmental skills or a regression of previously mastered skills.
- Grief reactions that are a safety risk to the child or others
- Noticeable sensory processing difficulties
- Decreased school performance
- Refusal to participate in activities that they used to
- Difficulties with regulating emotions that affect performance in daily activities.

# How to Refer

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- If you believe a child or teen would benefit from occupational therapy services, refer them to their doctor!
- Occupational Therapy Services in traditional settings require a referral from a doctor.
- Talk to your doctor about what you and the child have been experiencing during the grieving process.
  - Can bring up occupational therapy services as well
- Refer to handout to see how to have a conversation about OT services.

# Acknowledgements

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Dr. Adam Carter, NCC, CCMHC, FT

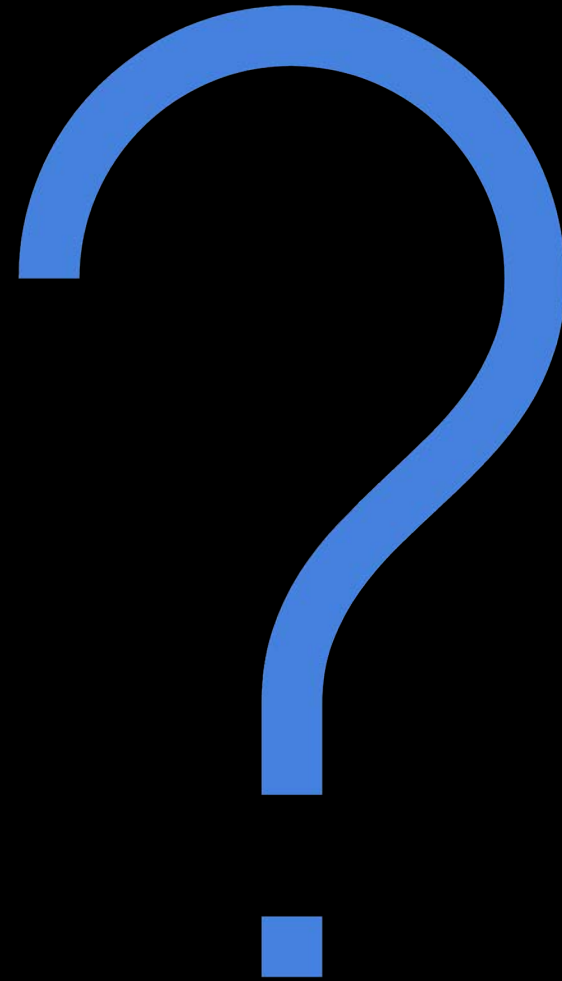
Erin's House for Grieving Children

Members at the NACG



Questions?

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- Visual Timer App: <https://www.timetimer.com/products/time-timer-ios-app>
- Visual Timer: : <https://www.lakeshorelearning.com/search/zero-results?Ntt=EA163>
- Water and Oil Timer: <https://www.amazon.com/Oneshow-Colorful-Hourglass-Functional-Ornaments/dp/B092S7YDHV>
- Yoga Dice: <https://www.myga.eco/products/kids-yoga-dice?variant=31355323383921>
- Arial Yoga: <https://familyapp.com/aerial-yoga-fitness/>

Thank you!

If you have any additional questions, please feel free to contact to me!

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