

Exploring Assessment of Pediatric Occupations and the Impact on Mental Health and Wellness:

A Community and Population Needs Assessment

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Introduction

- Occupational therapy is rooted in the area of mental health and continues to dynamically evolve to meet client needs.
- There remains a lack of research and tools to assess pediatric mental health and wellness leaving a gap in how therapists assess and address children's occupational performance and wellness.
- This needs assessment explored how children's daily occupations impact their mental health and wellness, and how structured vs unstructured play influences engagement, social interaction, and emotional regulation among children ages 5-12.
- The Model of Human Occupation (Esmaili et al., 2019) and the Model of the Process for Establishing Children's Occupations (Wiseman et al., 2005) were used to examine how volition, habituation, and environment shape occupational participation across development.

Key Questions

What are pediatric occupations?

What is the impact of pediatric occupations on wellness?

What do pediatric occupational therapists perceive as pediatric occupations?

Is it our job as occupational therapists to assess occupational wellness in children?

Which pediatric occupations are commonly evaluated using available assessments?

Purpose/Objectives

Purpose

The purpose of this needs assessment was to examine the participation of children aged 5 to 12 in structured vs unstructured play, with a focus on identifying the potential impact on their mental health and overall wellness. Additionally, the study aimed to explore environmental and behavioral factors that support or hinder occupational engagement.

Vision Statement

To promote pediatric mental health and wellness by understanding how occupations, both structured and unstructured, support growth, emotional regulation, and overall well-being in children ages 5-12.

Mission Statement

To explore and identify how children's participation in meaningful occupations impact their mental health, guiding occupational therapy's role in in fostering engagement in natural environments.

Methodology

- Interviews were conducted with site coordinators and staff members
- Structured and unstructured observations were conducted at Puglio Park, West Rocks Middle School Summer Camp, and Autism Health & Fitness Center
- Observations of pediatric behavior were summarized in chart format

Staff Interviews:

- How do you feel this facility, and what you do here, impacts mental health and wellness in children?
- Have you noticed any changes in a child's mood or behavior when they are engaged in activities? (ex: free play vs structured play, sensory play, motor/gross motor activity)
- What signs do you see or look at when a child is thriving here?
- Is there a particular story or scenario you have experienced where a child's participation in an activity has impacted their confidence or wellness?

Figure 1. Sample of semi-structured interview questions developed by research team to explore children's occupational participation and mental health supports at observation sites



Observations:

Observed Behavior	Structured Play	Unstructured Play	Notes (include type of activity)
Expresses enjoyment throughout the activity	Yes No N/a	Yes No N/a	
Transitions to new task independently/with assistance	Yes No N/a	Yes No N/a	
Demonstrates frustration or withdrawal in activity	Yes No N/a	Yes No N/a	
Follows directions throughout activity	Yes No N/a	Yes No N/a	

Figure 2. Portion of observation chart developed by research team. This section illustrates children's engagement in daily occupations during natural environment observations

Summer Camp Director stated:

"Last summer, on more than one occasion, he had complete meltdowns ... Throughout the summer, (following the structure) he did show a lot of improvement ... He had a little bit of a rough first day, but after that, he's really settled in."

AHFC staff members stated that children who thrive in their facility:

"Show wellness by their body language and facial expressions... if they are slower or flying through their workout, they aren't interested in it for the most part".

Results

Themes emerged from analysis of interview data:

- Structured activities more effectively supported emotional regulation compared to unstructured activities
- Children's behavioral and emotional growth takes time
- Creating a safe and positive environment fosters a sense of security

Themes emerged from analysis of observational data:

Puglio Park:

- Children engaged in **self-chosen activities** with minimal adult intervention.
- Allowed for **free expression** but raised **concerns** regarding **safety** & **lack of routine**.

WRMS & AHFC:

- Structured play relied heavily on **adult supervision**, with adults guiding transitions, prompting participation, & facilitating peer interaction.
- In both settings, children appeared to thrive, showing **increased engagement, smiles,** and **positive body language**.

Identified Themes from Observation Checklists

Children demonstrated participation in structured activities based on their personal interests

Unstructured activities allowed for children to engage in free expression but lacked adult supervision

Across all settings, children displayed positive mental health through engagement, upbeat emotions, body language, and steady improvement within the program.

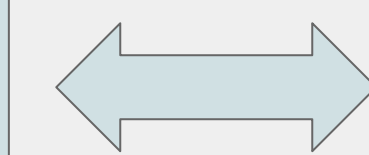
Discussion

Data analysis from observations and interviews revealed key differences between structured and unstructured play and how each impacts a child's emotional expression, social interaction, and overall wellness.

Structured Play	Unstructured Play
- Encouraged socialization through adult led routines & transitions - Supported peer engagement	- Encouraged free play, emotional expression, and creativity - Less supervision led to peer interaction through choice

Strengths

- Observations & interviews = rich qualitative data
- Structured checklist = consistency



Limitations

- Small sample size
- Limited diversity
- Only ⅓ sites allowed interviews

These findings highlighted the need for further exploration of how pediatric occupational therapists assess mental health and wellness including exploration of their role in supporting children across varying environments.

Ethical Considerations

- Verbal informed consent was obtained from adults prior to interview
- All data was confidential and recordings were deleted after analysis

Next Steps

- IRB proposal was submitted August 2025 and accepted September 2025
- A formal survey has been initiated to gather additional data for analysis
- Pediatric occupational therapists in Connecticut will be solicited for participation in the study to document their perspectives on assessing and supporting pediatric mental health and occupational wellness.



References



Handout

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