Tiered Sensory Supports in School-Based OT

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Session Materials



https://bit.ly/otac2026teng

Session Objectives

1. Participants will be able to define the **role of the occupational therapy practitioner in addressing sensory needs in the school setting** at various levels of tiered support.

2. Participants will be able to **identify, apply, and evaluate at least five tiered intervention strategies** that can be provided in the school setting for children with sensory processing differences.

Agenda

1. Intro to MTSS
2. MTSS & OT
3. Assessment of Sensory Needs
4. Tier One Applications
5. Tier Two Applications
6. Closing

Focusing on an

Educational Model

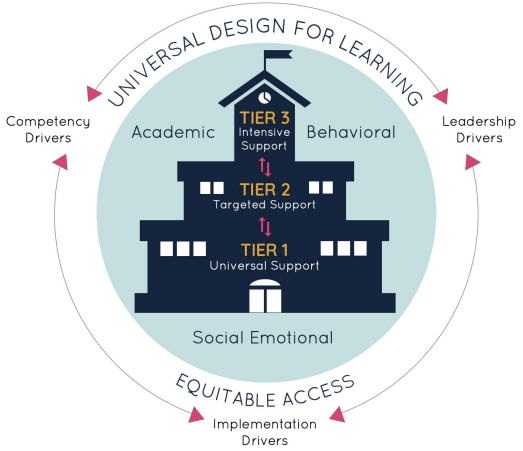


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Multi-Tiered System of Support (MTSS)

- Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) of 2015
  - Public Law 114-9 Replacing No Child Left Behind (NCLB)
  - Took Full Effect 2017-2018 School Year

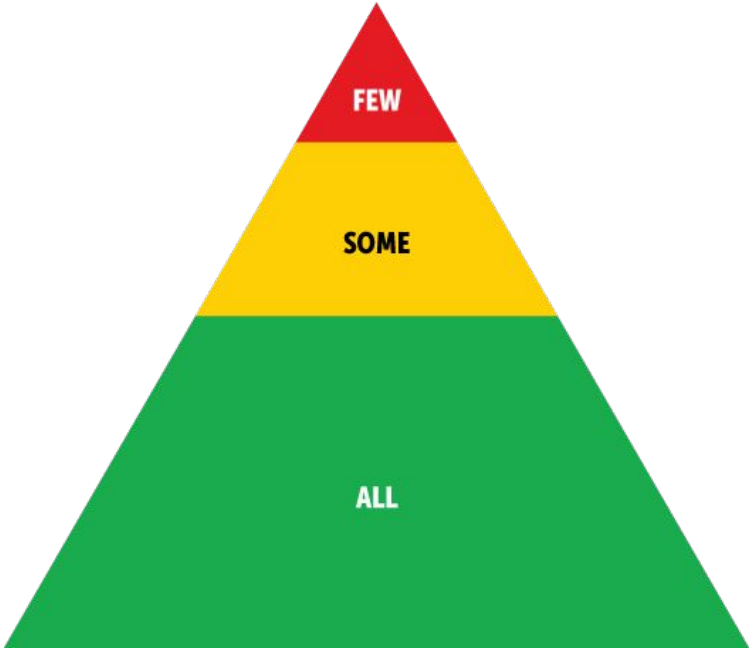
- Broader Approach to Response To Intervention (RTI)
  - Support Academically Struggling Students through Early Intervening Services (EIS)
  - Social and Emotional Supports (Behavioral Health)
    - Positive Behavioral Interventions & Supports
    - Behavior Intervention Plans
  - Interprofessional Collaboration



https://www.novakeducation.com/blog/pbis-rti-and-mtss

(AOTA, 2012; ASHA, 2016; APTA, 2022; Cunningham, n.d.; Averill & Rinaldi 2013; Rosen, n.d.; Novak Education, 2023)

MTSS Model



Intensive - 1- 5% of Students

Targeted - 10 - 15% of Students

Universal - 80% of Students

(AOTA, 2012; ASHA, 2016; APTA, 2022; Cunningham, n.d.; Averill & Rinaldi 2013; Positive Behavioral Intervention Supports, 2023; Rosen, n.d.; Novak Education, 2013)

Successful Implementation of MTSS Requires

- Universal Screenings in General Education Classroom of all Students
- Evidence-based Instructional Methods and Interventions
- Data Collection
- Data-Based Decision-Making (DDDM)
- Progress Monitoring

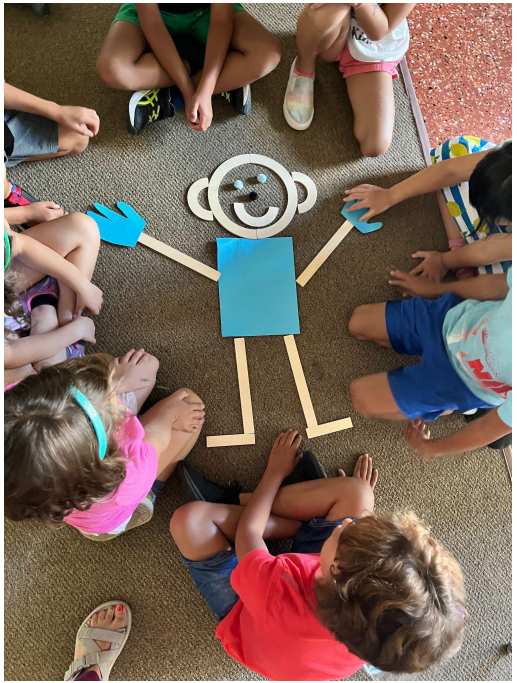


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(AOTA, 2012; ASHA, 2016; APTA, 2022; Piller, 2025; Cunningham, n.d.; Rosen, n.d.)

MTSS Model Within an OT Lens

Tier 1	Tier 2	Tier 3
OT provides training and education to teachers, assists with universal screening and may use population based approaches for all students	OT reviews data collected by GE and provides episodic problem solving to staff	OT reviews data collected by GE and evaluates in accordance with state requirements

*Note: This presentation will focus primarily on Tier One and Tier Two.

(Piller, 2025; Piller et al., 2023; AOTA, 2012; ASHA, 2016; APTA, 2022; Cunningham, n.d.; Positive Behavioral Intervention Supports, 2023; Rosen, n.d.)

Person – Environment – Occupation (PEO)

Inter-relationship of the person, environment and occupation

Increase in the fit between the three improves occupational performance

Modification of environment to increase fit between person and environment and thus increase occupational performance

(Law et al., 1996)





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PEO Applied to Tier Model

- Assessment of environment
- Assessment of person
- Modification of environment to increase fit

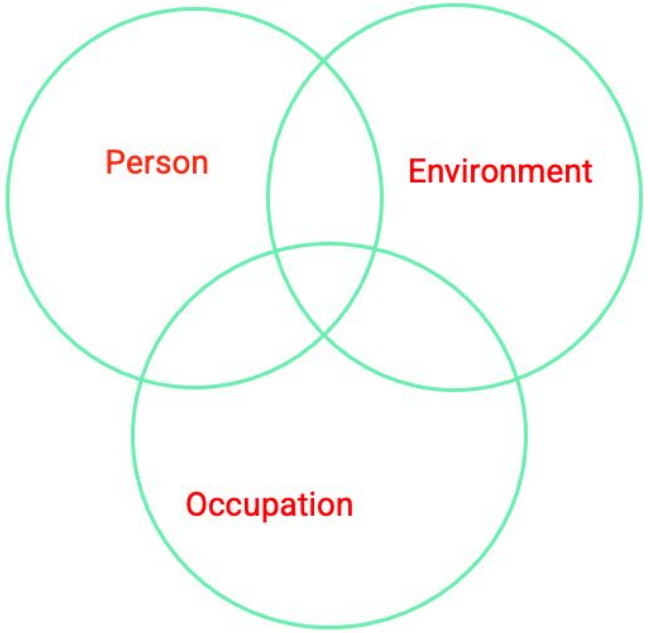


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Assessment of Sensory Needs

Choosing Wisely #2

Don't provide sensory-based interventions to individual children or youth without documented assessment results of difficulties processing or integrating sensory information.

(AOTA, 2023)

Definitions Per Choosing Wisely Recommendation

- Evaluation- process of gathering data to plan intervention and improve occupational performance
- Assessment- specific tool used in the evaluation process
- Formal Assessment- use of standardized assessments (criterion and norm-referenced); compares client's performance to population to quantify strengths and challenges

(AOTA, 2023; Piller, 2023)

Assessment Process - Formal

- Various methods of assessment
    - Observations, standardized, non standardized, etc.
- Occupational profile
- Evaluation of strengths and challenges to participation
- Evaluations of Sensory Integration and Processing (proximal)
    - Related assessment tools
- Assessment of participation (distal)





(Piller, 2025)

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Assessment Process - Formal

- Sensory Processing
  - SIPT and Evaluation of Ayres Sensory Integration (EASI)
  - Sensory Processing Measure 2 (SPM-2)
  - Sensory Profile
  - Structure Observations of Sensory Integration (SOSI)
  - Sensory Processing 3-Dimensions (SP3D)
  - Quick Neurological Screening Test (QNST)
  - Others
- Other areas - motor, visual, social, occupations, etc.
- Environment including Sensory Environment



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(Piller, 2025)

Assessment Process - Informal

- Interview-
  - Parent/caregiver
  - Teacher
  - Speech Language Pathologist
  - Others
- Observation
  - Observe client in various environments
  - Make sure at least one observation occurs in environment where difficulty is reported
- Informal questionnaires





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Consideration of Outcomes

- Discharge planning, gauge progress, determine need for services, research
- What is your purpose? What is available?
- Psychometric properties (test-retest reliability)
- Proximal and Distal outcomes
  - Proximal- sensory related outcomes
  - Distal- participation based outcomes

(May-Benson et al., 2018)

Tier One Assessment

Assessment of the environment

- Observations of various learning environments

Assessment of occupations

- Current routines of the students

Formal- Classroom Sensory Environment Assessment; Assessment of Learning Environment

Informal- Observation of environments, written schedules from teachers, observed routines of the classroom





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Tier One Intervention

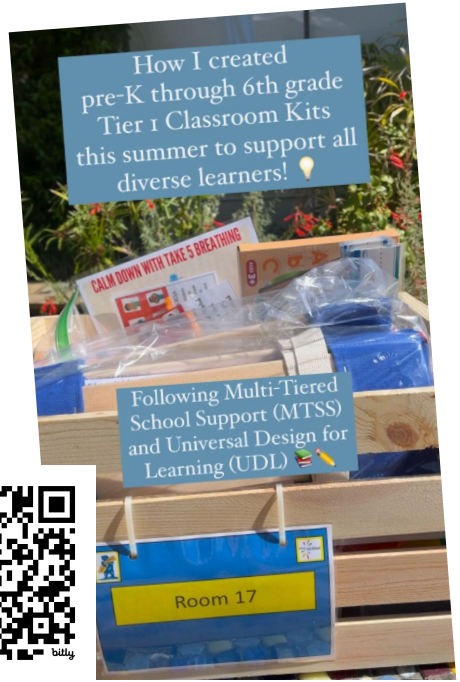
- Sensory Health for the Whole School (or class)
    - Classroom
        - Movement Breaks (53%);
        - Alternative seating (36.68%)
        - Visual organization and decreased distraction (23.91%)
        - Minimize auditory distractions; with less than 25% suggesting fidget toys, sensory corner, headphones, and weighted tools (Charles & Glennon, 2020)
    - Consultation and collaboration with groups
        - offering staff in-services on sensory regulatory strategies, or through education and training (e.g. establishing an awareness and understanding of sensory need addressed through occupational therapy) (Roley, Bissel, Clark, 2015)
        - Demonstrate the distinct value of occupational therapy in school settings (Clark, Parham, & Schaaf, 2019)



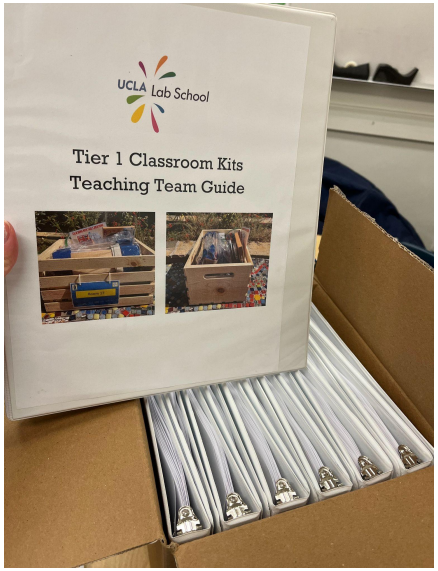


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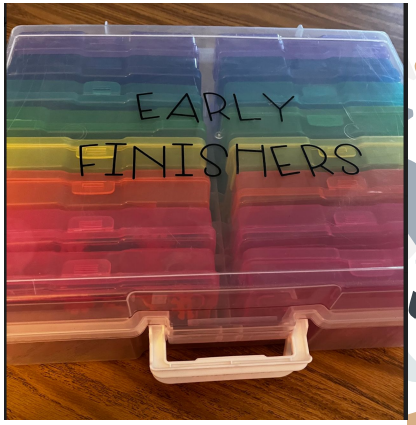
Samples of Tier One Intervention

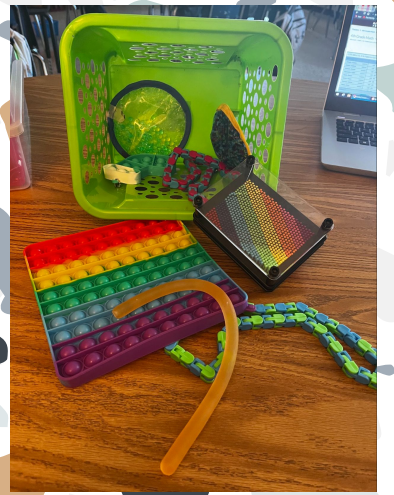


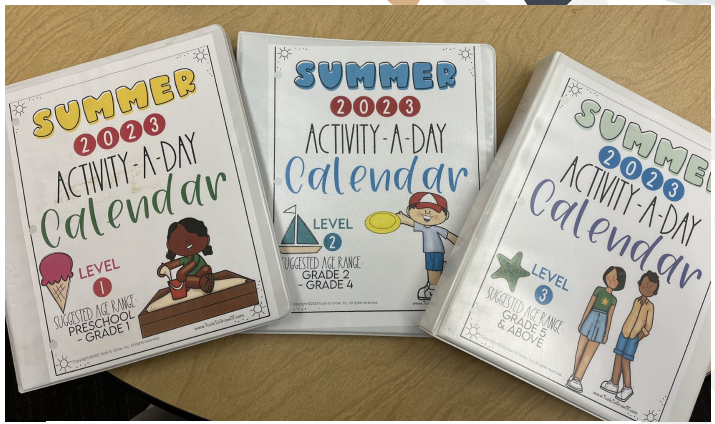
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Tier One Buy In

Every Student Succeeds Act (2015)-Universal strategies to help all students succeed

Annual statewide assessments

Build capacity at the system level

Networking and relationship building

Integrated throughout the day in all school environments

Tier Two Assessment

Assessment of the environment

- Assessment of classroom routines
- Sensory features of classroom

Assessment of person- identify students who have sensory needs

- Similar needs identified to provide group interventions
- Sensory processing patterns of the classroom
- Routines that involve sensory input (i.e. gym, recess, etc.)





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Tier Two Intervention – Classroom Strategies



Sensory-Based Strategies (Piller et al., 2025)

- Sensory desk and seating accommodations
- Fidget options
- Oral sensory input
- Allow for movement opportunities
    - Movement before, during, and after school lessons is essential for optimal engagement
    - Movement for children assists with providing the necessary sensory input to support the ability to follow classroom expectations (Biel, 2012)
    - Sensory group movement activities might include yoga, simple proprioceptive exercises, obstacle courses



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Tier Two Intervention – Classroom Strategies

- Classroom routines that assist with maintaining self-regulation
- Self-regulation in multiple settings (example: incorporate global strategies in the lunchroom to assist with calming the environment, movement breaks in the classroom for all students, playground options that provide calming [pushing, pulling, climbing] and not only alerting activities)
- Social participation and engagement across settings
- Use of Social Stories to increase desired behaviors (Frolek Clark, et al., 2019)



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Tier Two Intervention – Group Activities

- Modify the school environment
  - Smaller work areas, adaptive seating, visual supports, communication supports
- Regulation strategies
  - Lessons on regulation and tools to self regulate (Pfeiffer, Frolek-Clark, & Arbesman, 2017)
- Design and participate in classroom routines
  - Small group activities to classroom routines
  - Use daily routines and promote social interaction through meaningful tasks to regulate arousal (Biel, 2012; Whiting et al., 2021)



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Tier Two Intervention – Group Activities

- Use of in-classroom yoga to support students' self-regulatory behavior
- Social participation and engagement across settings
- Self -regulation and coping strategies for full classrooms to address mental health (Bayzak, 2020)
- Co-lead small groups or co-teaching in the school setting to address self-regulation challenges
- Relationship-based strategies can facilitate relations between teacher and student and peer to peer (Whiting et al., 2021)
- Promote social interaction and engagement among peers through modeling



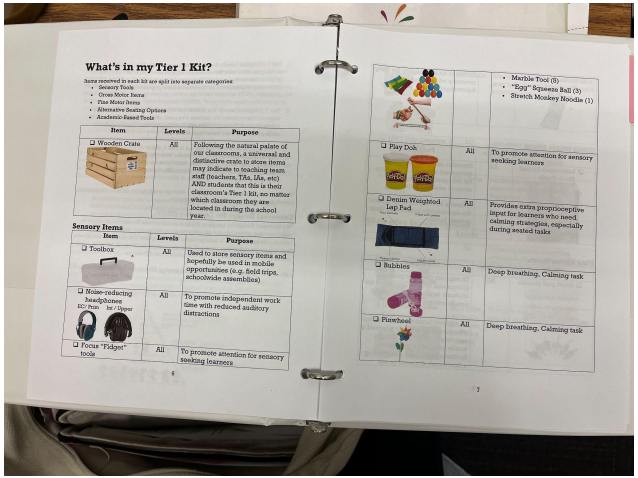
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Tier Two Buy In - Training

- Training for educators and school personnel can assist with tier two interventions

- Occupational therapy practitioner can provide coaching and consultation, or join problem-solving teams in the school setting (Cahill, 2019)





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Progress Monitoring

- Assesses student's academic performance (at all levels of instruction) to evaluate the effectiveness of instruction
- Easy and efficient to administer
- Results displayed for easy analysis and to help identify instructional changes needed

(Cahill, 2019; Parham et al., 2011; Schaaf & Mailloux, 2015)

Data Driven Decision-Making Process

- ID participation challenges/goals
- Describe level of fx in each area
- ID factors affecting participation
- Conduct assessment
- ID strengths and barriers
- Generate hypothesis
- Design intervention
- ID outcomes
- Conduct intervention
- Collect, display, analyze data
- Monitor progress

Progress Monitoring

1. Define the behavior
2. Select measurement strategy
3. Gather data about current performance
4. Define the goal: academic or non-academic
5. Create a data chart to visualize progress
6. Collect data regularly
7. Develop decision-making plan
8. Identify interventions

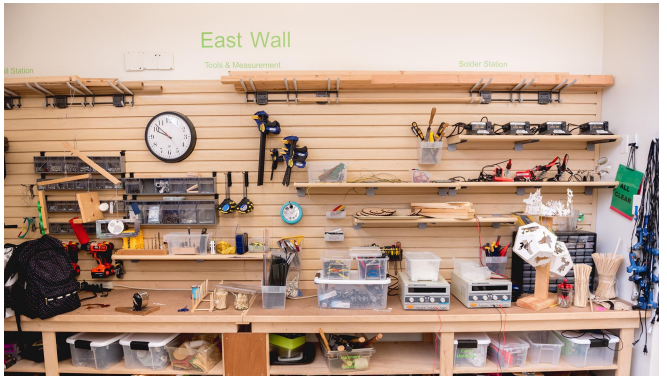


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(Frolek Clark & Chandler, 2019)

Promoting Carryover of Skills

- Strategies to promote Least Restrictive Environment (LRE)
- Educating on use of equipment or monitoring regulation throughout the day
- Trainings students to self-advocate
- Direct skill building
- Taking time to learn the educational perspective
- Build partnerships - Joint, collaborative problem solving
- Universal Design for Learning



(Frolek Clark & Chandler, 2019; Schoonover, 2019)

Key Takeaways

- There is role of the occupational therapy practitioner in addressing sensory needs in the school setting at various levels of support.
- There are several evidence-based interventions that can be provided in the school setting for children with sensory processing differences.
- Providing supports at early tiers have the potential to be more effective and more in line with recommendations when assessment is performed first
- Supports at earlier tiers have the potential to promote collaboration with school personnel and improve caseload/workload for therapists



THANKS!

What questions do you have for me?
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References

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