

FACT SHEET



PEDIATRICS

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The Role of School-based Physical Therapy: Successful Participation for All Students

Introduction

Physical therapy, although primarily classified under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) as a related service, can greatly benefit students without disabilities. Pediatric physical therapists are the “practitioners of choice” to apply evidence-based practices regarding the general growth and development of all students, as well as health, wellness, fitness, injury prevention, and obesity management. Benefits emerge from utilizing the expertise of physical therapists already present in school systems, as they are engaged with students, staff, and parents, and are knowledgeable about educational mandates and regulations (Senator Tom Harkin, Senator Mike Enzi; written communication, May 2010).

Physical Therapy’s Unique Contribution

All domains of children’s learning and development interrelate. Motor skills are among the tools that are essential for academic success.^{1,2} Physical therapists’ educational background, their thorough understanding of human development and motor proficiency, and the scope of physical therapy practice render them uniquely equipped to facilitate the development of these skills. It is well-established that physical activity is paramount to academic success; however, the fact that academic achievement is predicated on the mastery of movement skills has not been widely accepted.³ Physical therapists can foster academic performance, school participation, and obesity prevention⁴ by influencing school programs, routines, and curricula to address the motor proficiency of students in developmentally appropriate ways. “Best practice is based on knowledge—not assumptions—of how children learn and develop,”^{2p1} forming a solid basis for education.

The American Physical Therapy Association (APTA) embraces the model of the International Classification of Functioning, Disability, and Health (ICF model), which requires school-based physical therapists to address the whole student and focus on his/her strengths. School-based physical therapists collaborate with other specialized instructional support personnel and school community members to build student achievement in all domains that affect academic success and wellness. With the support of physical therapy, the connection among the principles of the ICF model, the Universal Design for Learning (UDL), and Response to Intervention (RtI) can make all types of instruction accessible to every student. Though the expertise of school-based physical therapists is most often considered for individual students, it also can be tapped to motivate the entire school community, promote education in the least-restrictive environment, and prevent inappropriate placements and unnecessary services.

Roles of School-based Physical Therapists

To serve all students, school-based physical therapists can:

- Serve as a knowledge bridge between understanding existing educational policies regarding physical activity (as it pertains to building academic achievement, obesity prevention, and health promotion) and implementation of these policies at the local level (eg, local education agencies, early intervention programs, preschools, Head Start).⁵
- Assist with the development of core curriculum standards and activities in motor development for all students, supporting RtI Tiers 1, 2, and 3.⁶
- Support increasingly accurate and appropriate special education referrals by implementing UDL, RtI principles, and differentiated instruction.
- Develop and provide universally designed and developmentally appropriate motor programs for all students.
- Ensure safe and accessible educational environments for staff and students.
- Assist classroom teachers and other educational personnel in incorporating movement and activity into instruction (eg, differentiated instruction, UDL, and RtI).
- Educate school staff on making the distinction between supporting developmentally appropriate motor skills for all students and screening for deficits.
- Educate school communities on the prevention of musculoskeletal injury and loss of health and function.

In light of the federal emphasis on success for all students and the escalating obesity epidemic, school-based physical therapists are strategically positioned to employ a holistic, preventative approach. To benefit from the existing resource of school-based physical therapists, a paradigm shift is required regarding service provision, school community's expectations, and funding.

References

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