



Identifying occupational therapy interventions in children and young people's mental health: A mixed methods systematic review

Key findings

Nine studies were included in the final review (Cantrill et al 2015; Hahn-Markowitz et al 2011; Maeir et al 2014; Rodger et al 2008; Rodger et al 2009; Rodger and Brandenburg 2009; Wilkes et al 2011; Wilkes-Gillan et al 2014; Wilkes-Gillan et al 2014a). The level of heterogeneity in the data meant that it was not possible to conduct a meta-analysis and a narrative synthesis was completed.

Considered as a whole, there is no high quality evidence for the effectiveness of occupational therapy with children and adolescents with common mental health problems.

The available evidence is confined to small-scale studies of occupational therapy interventions for those with Asperger's syndrome or attention deficit hyperactivity disorders.

For children and adolescents with a diagnosis of Asperger's syndrome there is limited low quality evidence that the Cognitive Orientation to Daily Occupational Performance intervention may improve daily living tasks.

For children and adolescents with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder a play-based intervention is potentially effective in improving play skills; and there is limited moderate quality evidence that the Cognitive-Functional intervention improves occupational performance.

Project aims

The primary review question was what is the effectiveness of occupational therapy on participation in everyday occupations in children and adolescents with mental health difficulties? More specifically, the study aimed to identify the evidence for the effectiveness of occupational therapy interventions that are occupation-based and/or occupation-focused.

Background

The Global prevalence of mental health disorders in children and adolescents ranges from 6.7% (Erskine et al 2017) to 13.4% (Polanczyk et al 2015). As many as 1 in 4 young people may also experience poor mental wellbeing, but do not meet diagnostic thresholds. (Lawrence et al 2015; Green et al 2005). The impact of mental health disorders in early life has a lasting impact on adult mental health, educational attainment, criminal activity and life satisfaction (for example, Fletcher et al 2009; Mock et al 2011). The scope of pharmacological interventions in childhood is limited (Cottrell and Kraam 2005) and other interventions, such as cognitive behavioural therapy, have shown contradictory evidence (for example, van Doorn et al 2017).

The most recent systematic review of occupational therapy in child and adolescent mental health (Arbesman et al 2013) broadly interpreted the scope of practice. These findings suggested that a more precise review was needed that included only those studies with participants diagnosed with mental health disorders, focussed on occupational therapy interventions and that used outcomes related to occupational participation. This shaped this systematic review.

Methodology

This review employed the Joanna Briggs Institute (JBI) methodology for mixed methods systematic reviews (Pearson et al 2014). The objectives, inclusion and exclusion criteria and methods of analysis for this review were specified in advance and published in a protocol (Brooks and Bannigan 2018).

A comprehensive literature search strategy was conducted in October 2017 using identified keywords and index terms in appropriate electronic databases and trial registers; searches were made for unpublished studies. Study selection was conducted by two independent reviewers using the approach recommended by the JBI (Pearson et al 2014). Full-texts were retrieved for all studies that met the inclusion criteria. The methodological quality of the studies selected for

inclusion was independently assessed by two reviewers using the standard critical appraisal instruments in JBI System for the Unified Management, Assessment and Review of Information (SUMARI). Data extraction was conducted using the recommended JBI approach (Pearson et al 2014).

Recommendations and Conclusion

There is no high-quality evidence for occupation-based and/or occupation-focused occupational therapy interventions with a wide range of common child and adolescent mental health difficulties. Given the long-term implications of mental health disorders in early life research is urgently needed to develop and evaluate effective interventions.

Further large-scale research is needed to confirm the effectiveness of the occupational therapy interventions, identified in this review, for children and adolescents with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder and Asperger's syndrome.

Publications

Brooks R and Bannigan K (2018) Occupational therapy interventions in child and adolescent mental health: a mixed methods systematic review protocol. *Joanna Briggs Institute Database of Systematic Reviews and Implementation Reports*. 16(9): 1764-1771.

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