Developing an occupational therapy clinical reasoning tool to enable occupational therapists to positively embed changes in the practices of support workers of people with learning disabilities.

Key findings

From analysis of data collected in cycles of action research, a prototype of the Supporting Engaging Environments ('SEE') occupational therapy clinical reasoning tool has been developed. The tool is to be used alongside direct work with a person with learning disabilities when there is a need to collaborate with their support network to embed recommendations and bring about the change they want or need, notably regarding their engagement in occupation.

The 'SEE' recognises the complex reasoning involved when working alongside support networks. It guides reflection, with questions and prompts to support identification of the issues restricting embedding recommendations. It supports investment of the right amount of time on assessment, intervention, report writing *and* implementation, acknowledging that provision of recommendations without investment in implementation may be insufficient for practice to change.

The 'SEE' draws on the Canadian Model of Occupational Performance and Engagement (CMOP-E) (Townsend and Polatajko, 2013). It can be used as an initial assessment to gain a thorough understanding of cultural, institutional and social, alongside the physical, elements of a support network's environment. The occupational therapist reflects on a series of questions and rates the extent to which the environment facilitates/allows/inhibits/restricts embedding of recommendations and bringing about the person's aim or hoped-for change. Overall conclusions are reached about the extent to which there is alignment of leadership, willingness, readiness, capacity and culture and the network's overall level of readiness for input.

Although the 'SEE' captures the barriers and challenges (alongside the facilitators), it is not necessarily about resolving them all as with some issues all that is possible is to remain aware and sensitive. Once thorough understanding of the environment of the support network has been gained, the tool is used to reason how best to work in order to set shared goals and embed recommendations to achieve them. The occupational therapist is guided towards strategies to work systematically and collaboratively as a team, and to develop this support network's knowledge, understanding and values, in particular regarding meaningful engagement in occupation.

Project aims

Aim:

For an experienced team of occupational therapists and occupational therapy assistants in a community learning disabilities service to develop a theory-informed way to successfully embed changes in the practices of support workers.

Objective:

To develop a tool that can be used by occupational therapists to think through the process of positively changing support workers' practices (in particular how they meaningfully engage people with learning disabilities in activities).

Background

To maintain occupationally fulfilled lives, the growing population of people with severe and profound learning disabilities needs skilled day-to-day support. Despite estimated expenditure of approximately 30% of the UK social care budget on this (Local Government Association, 2021) levels of meaningful engagement in activity can, however, remain extremely low.

Occupational therapists in community learning disability teams have a key role in addressing such occupational injustices (Royal College of Occupational Therapists, 2018). They work collaboratively with paid support networks (Haines et al., 2018) and recommend changes to practice, for example how support could be provided in a more enabling way. Embedding recommendations and achieving "implementation fidelity" (Cross & West, 2011, p.19), may however be challenging, with often disappointing changes in practice after even quite extensive input.

Increased understanding is needed of how occupational therapists can achieve better outcomes when working with support networks of people with learning disabilities.

Methodology

This research used a theory-led action research methodology (Galvin et al., 2018) to develop a prototype of the "Supporting Engaging Environments" (the 'SEE'), an occupational therapy clinical reasoning tool for embedding positive change in how support workers meaningfully engage people in occupation. The tool evolved from the contributions of occupational therapists and occupational therapy assistants from the community learning disability teams in a single English county into a number of cycles of action research activity.

Within action research groups, participants shared their experiences of working with support workers and were introduced to existing theory from research. They reflected on and discussed their practice and tool content came from analysing these discussions using thematic analysis (Bazeley 2013). Tool content items generated through this process were collated, refined and discussed at length to establish relevance, applicability and phrasing. Participants trialled and gave feedback on the prototype tool as it developed.

Recommendations and conclusion

The 'SEE' clinical reasoning tool appears to have good potential to (1) support occupational therapists to gain understanding of the support networks with which they need to collaborate to meet the goals of people with learning disabilities accessing their services; and (2) support reasoning to overcome barriers to implementing recommendations.

Further research will now establish the face and content validity and acceptability of the tool by gaining the views of occupational therapists from outside the service from whose practice it was developed and importantly the views of people with learning disabilities, their families, support workers and service managers. Future research will explore cases of use of the tool within multiple occupational therapy teams and evaluate outcomes for people with learning disabilities from its use.

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