Award-winning prevention for children and young people in Wales

Occupational therapists in Swansea University Health Board have transformed how support is provided for babies, children, young people and families. Rather than focusing primarily on specialist one-to-one interventions, their services has adopted a preventative model that supports children earlier and closer to where they live, learn and play.

The service supports children across a range of settings, including neonatal and acute care services, children's centres, schools, weight management services and youth justice services. Over recent years, the team has redesigned its model of care around universal, tarted and individualised support, ensuring children and families can access occupational therapy expertise more easily and equitably.

Shifting from specialist intervention to prevention

The redesign was developed in collaboration with RCOT and involved a significant culture change across the service. The team moved away from a model focused largely on responding to referrals and towards one that emphasises prevention, early intervention and system leadership.

A key driver for change was increasing demand for support with sensory processing and emotional regulation. Rather than relying solely on specialist appointments, the service developed community-based approaches that help children and families access support earlier.

Across Swansea, Neath and Port Talbot, occupational therapists deliver sensory regulation and sensory processing groups in local community venues. These groups are promoted and supported by voluntary sector organisations and carers' services, helping families access support in familiar community settings while connecting them with wider networks of advice and peer support.

Working with schools and communities

Occupational therapists work directly within schools, supporting teachers to understand sensory processing and emotional regulation and helping them create environments that enable children to participate successfully in education. Over time, this has improved understanding of children's needs and strengthened schools' ability to support pupils without requiring specialist intervention.

Strong partnerships with schools, voluntary organisations and families are central to the approach. Teachers can signpost families to community support, while voluntary organisations help promote activities and provide ongoing support. This allows occupational therapists to focus their expertise where it has the greatest impact while ensuring families have access to sustainable support networks.

The service has also developed innovative joint posts spanning health and education, enabling occupational therapists to work seamlessly across organisational boundaries with a shared focus on children's participation, wellbeing and outcomes.

Impact

This approach has been recognised nationally and has received awards for its impact. The model

has contributed to a significant reduction in the number of children requiring specialist support and has enabled the service to meet growing demand more effectively. Requests have increased by 35%, yet the service has been able to respond without increasing staff numbers by working differently and making better use of partnerships and community resources.

The approach has improved staff morale and strengthened collaboration between health, education and community partners.

Looking ahead

Building on this success, the service is aiming to expand occupational therapy's role within school and youth justice settings. The team believes earlier occupational therapy support can help keep children engaged in education, improve attendance, reduce exclusions and address unmet sensory and emotional regulation needs before they escalate

What can occupational therapists learn from this approach?

The experience in Swansea Bay demonstrates how occupational therapists can improve outcomes by working beyond traditional service boundaries. By investing in relationships, supporting communities and building the skills of families, teachers and partner organisations, occupational therapists can help more children access the right support at the right time while reducing demand for specialist services.

The model also points to the importance of the physical location of where occupational therapists work. The education learning team shares offices with the teachers and educational psychologists. Therapy teams are collocated and hot desk together, reducing friction.

> **'There's still lots of services that are firefighting and to make service changes like this, takes energy and motivation. I've had to work hard to coach my team through this. People are often overworked. But when they can start to see the changes and see the success, that's helpful to create the momentum for change. Working as a team has been crucial and realising that your team is across traditional boundaries; you need to collaborate across boundaries.'**

Amanda Atkinson, Head of Occupational Therapy for Babies, Children and Young People, Swansea Bay University Health Board