



A GUIDE FOR PARENTS

What does a paediatric occupational therapist *actually* do?

And how OT can help your child feel confident, capable and connected in everyday life.

For families of children aged 2 to 10
in the Northern Rivers, NSW

In the bottom left corner, there are several overlapping circles in shades of teal and light blue, mirroring the design elements used in the logo.

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So, what is OT?

In OT, an **occupation** is anything meaningful we do each day. For children, that means playing, learning, looking after themselves, and getting along with others.

A paediatric occupational therapist helps children build the skills they need to do these things more easily, more independently and with more joy.

“OT isn’t about changing who your child is. It’s about helping everyday life feel easier and more joyful.”

A CHILD’S EVERYDAY JOBS INCLUDE

Playing

Getting dressed

Eating

Drawing & writing

Sleeping

Managing big feelings

Making friends

Learning at school

Toileting

Bath & teeth time

Riding a bike

Helping at home

Packing a school bag

Haircuts & dentist visits

Moving between activities

And the best part? Most OT sessions **look a lot like play**, because play is how children learn best.

Areas your OT might work on

Fine motor skills

Strength and control in little hands and fingers.

Holding a pencil, using scissors, doing up buttons, handwriting.

Gross motor & coordination

Balance, body awareness and whole-body movement.

Climbing, catching a ball, riding a bike, sitting comfortably at a desk.

Sensory processing

How your child takes in and responds to sounds, touch, movement and more.

Sensitivity to noise or clothing tags, a strong need for movement, finding mess uncomfortable.

Emotional regulation

Understanding feelings and discovering what helps your child feel safe and settled.

Big feelings, overwhelm, transitions, worry.

...and a few more

Self-care & independence

Building everyday life skills, one step at a time.

Dressing, toileting, brushing teeth, bedtime and morning routines.

Feeding & mealtimes

Making mealtimes calmer and trying new foods feel safer.

A small range of safe foods, using cutlery, sensitivity to textures.

Play & connection

Connecting with others in ways that feel natural to your child.

Shared interests, imaginative play, play that feels good to them, finding their people.

School readiness & learning

Getting ready for the classroom and thriving once there.

Attention, organisation, understanding instructions, visual perception.

IS OT RIGHT FOR MY CHILD?

Signs your child might need a little extra support

Every child is wonderfully different and grows at their own pace. OT might help if your child:

- ✓ Finds drawing, cutting or writing tiring or frustrating
- ✓ Finds it tricky to coordinate their body, or tires quickly in play
- ✓ Feels overwhelmed by noise, clothing, textures or mess
- ✓ Needs lots of movement to feel settled, and it's hard to find ways that work at home or school
- ✓ Often feels overwhelmed, with big meltdowns or shutdowns, especially around change
- ✓ Needs a lot of support with dressing, toileting or eating
- ✓ Feels safest with a very small range of foods
- ✓ Would like support to connect with other kids in ways that feel good to them
- ✓ Finds the classroom hard, with attention, sitting for long periods or getting organised taking lots of energy
- ✓ Has a teacher, GP or educator who has suggested OT

Trust your gut. You know your child best. If everyday life feels harder than it needs to, for your child or for you, it's always okay to ask. No referral or diagnosis needed.

What to expect

1

Getting to know you

We start by listening. You share your worries, your child's strengths and what everyday life looks like at home and school.

2

Assessment

Through play, games and observation (and sometimes standardised tests), we build a clear picture of how your child is going.

3

Setting goals together

We choose goals that matter to your child and your family, like "getting dressed for school on my own".

4

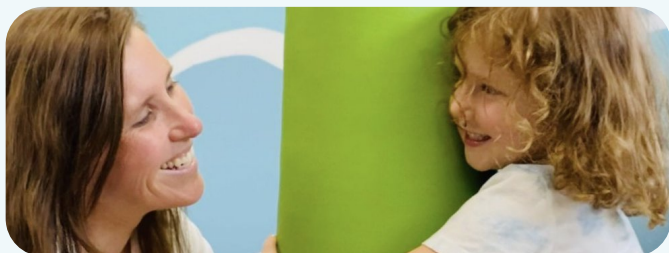
Therapy sessions

Fun, play-based sessions that build skills and confidence, pitched at just the right challenge.

5

Carrying it into daily life

You'll get simple ideas to try at home, and with your permission we can work with teachers and educators too.



Help with the cost

There are a few ways families can get help with the cost of OT. Every family's situation is different, so just ask and we'll help you work out what applies to you.

NDIS

If your child has an NDIS plan, OT may be funded through capacity building supports. We also complete Functional Capacity Assessments (FCAs) to support NDIS access requests and plan reviews.

Medicare: GP plan

If your child has a chronic or complex condition, your GP may be able to set up a chronic condition management plan, with Medicare rebates for up to five allied health sessions a year.

Medicare: autism & eligible disabilities

Children under 13 with autism or another eligible disability may be able to claim Medicare rebates for up to 20 allied health sessions in total, with a referral from a paediatrician or psychiatrist.

Private health insurance

Many extras policies include OT. Check with your fund to see what you can claim.

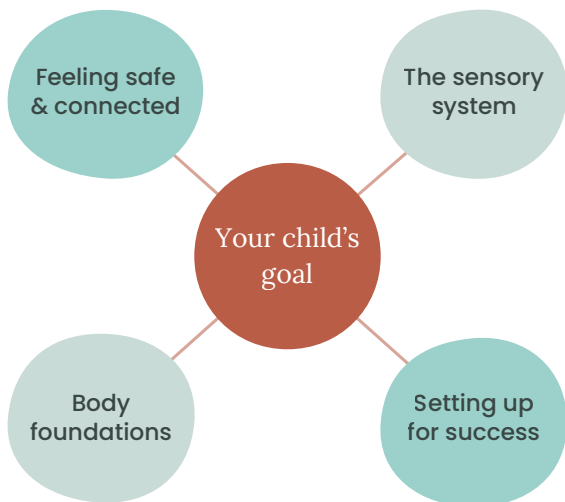
Rebates usually cover part of the fee, so there may be an out-of-pocket cost. Please get in touch for our current fees.

One goal, many doorways

So far we've looked at **what** OT can help with. This section shows **how** we get there.

Your child's goal sits right in the middle. It might be getting dressed on their own, coping with the school drop-off, or joining in at the park.

There are many different ways in. Your OT chooses the doorways that suit **your** child, and usually starts with helping them feel safe and regulated, because a regulated body and brain finds it easier to learn and connect.



Based on Kim Barthel's Clinical Reasoning for Intervention.

Connection comes first

Coregulation relationship

Children learn to find their calm by “borrowing” it from a trusted adult. We build a warm, trusting relationship first, and share ways you can be your child’s calm anchor.

Looks like: a steady voice, matching your child’s pace, staying close through big feelings.

Emotional safety

A child’s brain learns best when they feel safe. Your child is accepted and understood, never judged, so they feel brave enough to try new things.

Looks like: following your child’s lead, celebrating effort, encouragement without pressure.

Trauma-informed approaches

Hard experiences like hospital stays, big changes or stress can shape how a child’s nervous system reacts. We look beneath behaviour to understand what your child needs, and never use force.

Looks like: offering choices, gentle pacing, noticing stress signals early.

Feeling heard and capable

Autonomy & agency

Children thrive when they have a say. Your child gets real choices and a voice in their therapy, which builds confidence, motivation and a sense of “I can do this”.

Looks like: choosing activities, helping set goals, learning they're the boss of their own body.

Play

Play is a child's most important job and our most powerful tool. Through play we build skills, connection and joy all at the same time.

Looks like: obstacle courses, pretend play, and games chosen to target a specific skill.



Every climb is a chance to build strength, planning and confidence.

More than five senses

You probably learnt about five senses at school. There are actually **eight**, and three of them work quietly behind the scenes. Together they tell your child's brain what's happening around them and inside their body.

THE HIDDEN THREE

Vestibular balance & movement

Sensors in the inner ear tell us which way is up, how fast we're moving and help us stay steady. This supports balance, posture, focus and feeling safe when our feet leave the ground.

You might notice: feeling unsure on swings or being upside down, or loving spinning, rocking and jumping.

Proprioception body position

Muscles and joints tell the brain where the body is and how much force to use, without needing to look.

You might notice: bumping into things, pressing hard with pencils, or loving big, squeeze hugs.

Interoception inside the body

Signals from inside, like hunger, thirst, needing the toilet or a racing heart. These are closely linked to emotions.

You might notice: not getting to the toilet in time, not noticing hunger, or meltdowns that seem to come from nowhere.

The familiar five

Touch

Tells us about pressure, texture, temperature and pain, and helps us feel safe or alert.

You might notice: dislikes tags, haircuts or messy hands, or loves touching everything.

Sight

Helps us notice, follow and make sense of what we see.

You might notice: bothered by bright lights or busy rooms, or misses visual details.

Hearing

Helps us tune in to important sounds and tune out background noise.

You might notice: covers ears at hand dryers or parties, or doesn't seem to hear their name.

Taste

Tells us about flavours and textures in the mouth.

You might notice: a small range of safe foods, gagging on some textures, or chewing on non-food items.

Smell

Closely linked to memory and emotion.

You might notice: strong reactions to smells, or sniffing objects and people.

Every child's sensory cup is different

Imagine each sense has a cup. Some cups are **small** and fill up quickly, so a little input feels like a lot. Others are **big** and need lots of input before your child notices it.



Small cup
Fills fast



Big cup
Takes lots to fill

Avoider

Small cup. Knows what feels like too much, and steps away to stay comfortable.

Sensor

Small cup. Notices details others miss, and may find busy places tiring.

Seeker

Big cup. Loves input and goes looking for more: moving, touching, making noise.

Bystander

Big cup. Easygoing, and may take a moment to notice their name or a messy face.

Most children have a mix. A child might avoid loud noises but seek lots of movement. There's no right or wrong profile. Each one comes with its own strengths, and a sensory assessment helps us understand your child's unique mix.

Based on Winnie Dunn's model of sensory processing.

How we work with the senses

Sensory integration

Our brains are always taking in touch, sound, sight, movement, balance and body position, then organising it so we can respond. When this is tricky, everyday things can feel “too much” or “not enough”.

Looks like: carefully planned swinging, climbing and textured play.

Sensory pacing & arousal modulation

Every child has an “engine” that can run fast, slow or somewhere in between. We help your child notice their engine, and discover what helps them feel good for what they’re doing.

Looks like: movement breaks before homework, calming activities before bed.

Interoception

We help your child notice and name their body’s inside signals, so they can respond before things feel too big.

Looks like: body-check games, feeling your heartbeat after jumping, naming body clues.

Calming, organising input

Heavy work

Pushing, pulling, lifting and carrying give strong input to the muscles and joints. Many children find this organising and calming.

Looks like: carrying shopping bags, wheelbarrow walks, pushing the washing basket, climbing.

Deep pressure touch

Firm, even pressure, like a big bear hug, can help the nervous system settle. Always offered with your child's consent and comfort in mind.

Looks like: cushion squishes, a "burrito" roll in a blanket, firm hugs. Weighted items only with OT guidance.

Rhythmicity

Our nervous systems love rhythm. Steady, repetitive movement and sound help the body and brain feel organised and regulated.

Looks like: rocking, swinging, bouncing, clapping games, songs with a steady beat.

Building strong foundations

Postural strength

Strong core and shoulder muscles give a steady base for sitting at a desk, writing, catching a ball, and even paying attention.

Looks like: animal walks, crawling games, playing on tummy.

Extensor / flexion positioning

Our bodies need a balance of stretching out (extension) and curling in (flexion). These positions build strength and body control, and curling up can also feel calming.

Looks like: “superman” on the tummy, curling into a ball, rolling in a barrel, therapy ball play.

Primitive reflexes

Babies are born with automatic movement reflexes that usually fade as the brain matures. OTs may look at these patterns, alongside everything else, to understand how movement and posture are developing.

Looks like: movement play that builds coordination and body control.

Mouth, breath and calm

Suck, swallow, breathe synchrony

Coordinating sucking, swallowing and breathing is one of our very first skills. It supports eating, drinking and mouth control, and sucking or blowing can be really calming.

Looks like: drinking through a straw, blowing bubbles or whistles, crunchy or chewy snacks.

Why the body matters. Big skills like handwriting and focus sit on top of these building blocks. Strengthening the foundations often makes everything above them easier.

Changing the world around them

Environment supports

Sometimes the easiest change isn't to the child, but to their surroundings. We look at noise, lighting, seating, clutter and space at home, kindy or school.

Looks like: a cosy calm corner, noise-reducing headphones, a wobble cushion.

Predictability & transitions

Knowing what's coming next helps children feel safe. Moving from one activity to another can be one of the hardest parts of the day.

Looks like: visual schedules, countdown timers, "first, then" boards, transition songs.



A calm, playful space helps children feel safe enough to connect.

Making tasks just right

Change the instruction or task

If something is too hard, we change the task rather than asking your child to simply try harder. The “just right” challenge builds success and confidence.

Looks like: smaller steps, showing instead of telling, pencil grips and other handy tools.

Cognitive supports (when regulated)

Thinking strategies like planning, problem solving and talking about feelings work best once your child’s body is calm. We help with regulation first, then build these “thinking brain” skills.

Looks like: social stories, step-by-step plans, and talking it through after a meltdown, not during.

Regulate, relate, then reason.

The sequence of engagement described by Dr Bruce Perry

Simple ideas to try at home

Small, playful moments add up. Pick one or two that suit your child, and keep it fun.

Connection & calm

- Spend 10 minutes a day in play where your child leads and you follow.
- Name feelings out loud: "You look frustrated. That tower keeps falling."
- Set up a cosy calm corner with cushions, a blanket and a favourite book.

Move & heavy work

- Let your child carry the shopping, push the washing basket or help move chairs.
- Try animal walks: bear crawls, frog jumps and crab walks.
- Head to the playground to climb, swing, hang and slide.

Busy little hands

- Squish, roll and cut playdough.
- Pick up pom-poms with tongs or pegs, or peel and place stickers.
- Draw on a vertical surface like an easel, a window or paper taped to the wall.

Everyday routines & independence

Smoother routines

- Use a picture schedule for tricky times like mornings and bedtime.
- Give a heads-up before changes: "Five more minutes, then bath."
- Try "first, then": "First shoes, then the park."

Mouth & breath

- Blow bubbles, pinwheels or cotton balls across the table.
- Drink thick smoothies through a straw.
- Offer crunchy or chewy snacks when your child needs to settle or focus.

Growing independence

- Let your child finish the last step of a task, like pulling up their sock, and celebrate it.
- Allow extra time so they can have a go without rushing.
- Praise the effort, not just the result.

Keep it gentle. Stop if your child seems upset or overwhelmed. Your OT can tailor these ideas to suit your child.

Common myths about OT

MYTH OT is only for children with a diagnosis.

TRUTH Many children see an OT without any diagnosis. If everyday tasks are tricky, OT can help.

MYTH It's just playing.

TRUTH Play is the tool. Every activity is carefully chosen to build a specific skill.

MYTH OT is about getting a job.

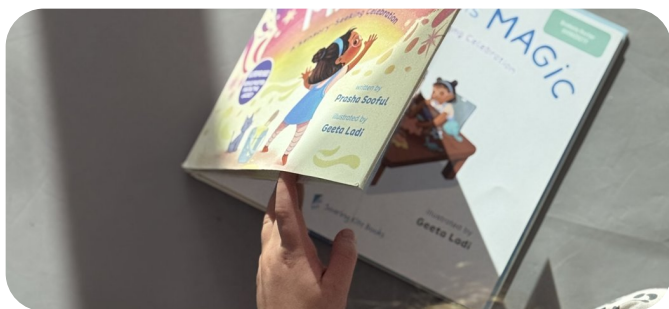
TRUTH For kids, "occupations" are play, learning, self-care and friendships.

MYTH They'll grow out of it.

TRUTH Some differences are simply part of who your child is, and that's okay. Support now can make everyday life feel easier, rather than waiting.

MYTH Parents just sit and wait.

TRUTH You're a key part of the team. What happens at home makes the biggest difference.





ABOUT US

Children's occupational therapy in the Northern Rivers, NSW

We celebrate neurodiversity with a playful, inclusive and strengths-based approach, working alongside families, educators and health professionals to understand each child's unique profile and support the foundations they need to thrive.

HOW WE CAN HELP

- **OT assessments** for children aged 2 to 10, including Functional Capacity Assessments (FCAs)
- **Sensory processing assessments** with practical, individualised strategies
- **Primitive reflex integration** in Alstonville and Byron Bay

BOOK AN ASSESSMENT

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF COUNTRY

Spirited Connections acknowledges the Bundjalung people, the Traditional Custodians of the land on which we live, work and play, and pays respect to Elders past and present.