

OTs' Approach to Caregiver Stress in Parents of Children With Sensory Dysfunction

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PURPOSE: Parenting is a stressful occupation, even more so for caregivers of children with sensory dysfunction. Support for caregivers, burdened by stress due to sensory behaviors, is within the scope of occupational therapy practice for a client-centered approach. While pediatric occupational therapy practitioners (OTPs) often observe caregiver stress, little was found regarding the specifics of how it is addressed in occupational therapy practice. The purpose of this study was to determine quantitative and qualitative information regarding what signs of stress are observed and how OTs address this issue. The issue is essential as a client-centered approach because caregiver burden affects the quantity and quality of occupational engagement that the caregiver can support. Further, sensory processing issues are highly prevalent in children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD). The incidence of ASD is expected to continue to rise.

METHOD: A twelve-question online survey was developed with closed-ended and open-ended questions regarding how OTPs address the issue in practice. A convenience sample of pediatric OT practitioners was obtained by disseminating the survey through the American Occupational Therapy Association's OTComm forum, Facebook, and an email invitation to pediatric OTPs. Questions focused on current practice for assessing and addressing observed caregiver stress. The research questions for this study were: 1) Do OTPs address caregiver stress? 2) What are the sources of caregivers' stress among parents of children with sensory dysfunction? and 3) What intervention methods or tools do OTPs use to address caregiver stress?

RESULTS: Quantitative data was analyzed using SPSS statistical software using paired-samples *t*-tests, and qualitative information was analyzed using thematic analysis. Most (97%) respondents (*n* = 121) reported that they had observed caregiver stress. Seventy-eight percent reported that they had addressed caregiver stress during discussions with the caregiver. However, only 7% reported the use of an objective tool to assess caregiver stress. Anxiety, depression, and fatigue of caregivers were common themes reported by OTs. Methods used to address caregiver stress included self-care education, parent support groups, information on respite, and referral to medical or mental health services.

CONCLUSION: Caregiver stress impacts both the pediatric client and the ability of the caregiver to provide support to a developing child. Sensory processing issues have a unique effect due to the behaviors that can cause taxing of time and energy on the caregiver. The topic of sensory processing is well-embedded in the curriculum of entry-level occupational therapy coursework. However, the study found that OTPs with more experience were more likely to address caregiver stress as part of the intervention. The researchers recommend increased topic educational opportunities for OT practitioners, use of a tool to assess caregiver stress, and OT networking to find local caregiver supports and resources to promote a client-centered approach and practice using an evidence base.

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