

Occupational Therapists' Perspectives on Breast and Chest-Feeding Interventions for Dyads with Medical Complexity: A Mixed Methods Study

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PURPOSE: The study aimed to explore occupational therapists' current practices of direct breast/chest-feeding interventions and co-occupational challenges experienced by clients with medically complex conditions. Due to the limited research on occupational therapists' contributions to direct breast/chest-feeding, this study was needed to identify clinical barriers experienced by occupational therapists working in this emerging area of practice and insights into their interventions used.

DESIGN: An explanatory sequential mixed methods research design was used to explore therapists' perspectives and clinical interventions.

METHOD: An expert reviewed, cross-section survey was dispersed online (N = 102), followed by two focus groups (N = 7) for an in-depth analysis of therapists' interventions, challenges, demographics, and practice settings.

RESULTS: Therapists with specialty certifications (lactation, $p < .001$; non-lactation, $p = .021$) supported direct breast/chest-feeding more frequently than those without. Therapists with lactation certifications provided direct interventions more frequently ($p < .001$) and advocated for direct feeding interventions more often ($p = .035$). Focus group themes of holistic interventions and role evolution emerged to enable direct breast/chest-feeding co-occupations. All focus group participants reported evolving their clinical roles to mitigate missed direct breast/chest-feeding opportunities for clients during sensitive periods of co-occupational establishment and sustainability.

CONCLUSION: Occupational therapists holistically support direct breast/chest-feeding for medically complex dyads. More research is needed to support intervention efficacy. The impact of this study will likely exert a powerful influence on occupational therapy practice by signifying the importance of lactation education and advocacy in academic and clinical programs to support breast/chest-feeding as primary co-occupations for birthing parents and their children.

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