

Occupational and Physical Therapy in the Educational Environment

School-based occupational and physical therapy (OT and PT in special education lingo) is designed to support the student so that he or she can access and be successful in the school learning environment. Every student is different, so depending on a student's needs, OT may include improving fine motor skills, sensorimotor processing, proprioceptive and kinesthetic input, coordination, adapting environments, and organizing and using materials appropriately. Physical therapy may include the development and practice of gross motor skills, postural control, functional mobility (transfers, gait, or wheelchair mobility), endurance, strength, range of motion, equilibrium and protective reactions, coordination or other underlying performance components that significantly impact the student's educational experience. For some students self-care skills that are appropriate to the learning environment may also be included in OT and /or PT services.

It is important to understand that school-based services for both occupational and physical therapy are not intended to meet the medical needs of a student and are not to replace therapies that may be provided outside of an education environment. Educational OT and PT interventions are distinctly different from clinically based, medically necessitated treatment. Although medical conditions and/or a disability may be present, unless it impacts the student's ability to benefit from the educational program, services may not be required. In Arizona an OT or PT can evaluate a child (with parental permission) and implement a program plan without a physician's referral.

With that in mind, to determine if there is a need for occupational or physical therapy intervention, the therapists must observe the student within the educational environment and assess his or her ability to meet the demands of that setting, including physically accessing the environment.

Occupational therapy and physical therapy are both termed "related services" under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), and are provided to help a student with a disability to benefit from special education. Neither OT nor PT are stand alone services under special education. Services are based on individual needs, not on generalizations based on a specific category of eligibility.