

Medically Prescribed Daycares: Expanding Opportunities for Children with Special Needs

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The aim of the capstone project was to expand on existing knowledge in the non-traditional setting of medically prescribed daycares.

Background

- Parents do not receive enough external support or have access to inclusive daycares. Participation in a daycare allows parents to provide financially for their families, and presents children the opportunity to learn from one another in a meaningful environment (Callander & Lindsay, 2018; Palasky, 2007).
- Play is a crucial component to physical, cognitive, social, and emotional development (Marks, 2016).
- Barriers to child care for children with special needs: Lack of available providers, financial strain on families due to higher rates for children with disabilities, & quality of care (Collins, Fischer, & Lalich, 2014; Cutler & Gilkerson, 2002; Houser, McCarthy, Lawer, & Mandell, 2014).
- Often families of a child with a disability are left with one parent unemployed due to the challenge of finding specialized care, & additionally having to take more time off than their co-workers due to the child's illness, behaviors, or transporting their child to frequent therapy and medical appointments (Houser et al., 2014).
- 55% of child care providers feel they lack proper training to care for children with special needs (Smith, 2010).
- Medically prescribed daycares enroll children with social-emotional behavior issues, developmental concerns, or medical and health concerns, along with typically developing children. Services offered often include: day program, weekend program, summer camps, skilled nursing care, onsite therapy, & parent education and support groups (Palasky, 2007).
- Early intervention services and providing supports for children in inclusive daycares in the child's first few years of life can reduce the need for special education or additional services in the future- therefore reducing long-term costs on society (Cutler & Gilkerson, 2002).
- Occupational therapists are ideal leaders in establishing medically prescribed daycares as they can serve in direct practice at the site, work in a consulting role to implement strategies in the classrooms, advocate for families, and impact policy and program development to expand services (Lynch, Ashcraft, & March Tekell, 2017).
- Because the service is physician prescribed, often times it can be covered at least partially by insurance, but reimbursement available will vary from state to state (Palasky, 2007).

Theoretical Foundation

- The project was guided by the **Ecology of Human Performance (EHP)** and the **Social Learning Theory**.
- The EHP theoretical framework emphasizes how context impacts human behavior and abilities (Dunn, Brown, & Mcguigan, 1994).
- A child with a disability will have a vastly different environment when spending the majority of their time at home, compared to a child who goes to a center-based daycare and has various social and physical factors supporting their development (Myers, 2006).
- Children experience many changes & transitions in life which may interfere or support their task performance, thus occupational therapists must consider all factors within a child's daily routine that may impact development (Myers, 2006).
- The primary focus of Social Learning Theory is on how children's thought processes and experiences influence behavior and development (Bandura, 1977; Grusec, 1992).
- Observing behaviors of peers in a daycare setting is motivating to children to learn and retain new skills, especially when it comes to engaging in play activities.
- According to the Social Learning Theory, socialization is essential in shaping and learning new behaviors and reaching developmental milestones.

Methods and Activities

- Onsite mentorship and hands-on experience were completed at the following locations: Heart in Hands Developmental Center, Children's Respite Care Center (CRCC), & Creative Therapy Solutions.
- Group and individual interventions were provided throughout the child care daily routine to target developmental goals, including: (1) meal times, (2) toileting, (3) crafts incorporating fine motor, pre-writing skills, and sensory exploration, and (4) free play.
- Organized therapeutic activity suggestions within a resource manual as a guide to classroom teachers.
- Developed a complete business plan to start and sustain a medically prescribed daycare from the perspective of an occupational therapist as the business owner.
- Completed two continuing education courses on the topics of universal design in a children's museum and fostering friendships in children with autism.
- Participated in weekly social play groups which provided children with increased opportunities for social interactions, while providing parents with a support group.
- Created an informational brochure for Heart in Hands to assist in raising awareness and support for the center.
- Developed a policy and procedure manual, performance evaluation, and skills checklist contributing to knowledge on business development and management.

Key Findings and Conclusions

- The idea behind medically prescribed daycares is to provide an affordable service that can adequately meet the medical and developmental needs of a variety of children, especially children typically turned away from other daycares.
- Onsite therapy services decreases the burden of care on families taking children to frequent appointments after school/work hours, and improves the continuum of care as all providers can work together daily.
- Factors contributing to the success of sustaining a medically prescribed daycare: (1) affordability of services, (2) accepting disability waivers and Medicaid reimbursement for care, (3) full-time therapy staff integrated into the classrooms to provide support, (4) continuously applying for applicable grants, (5) hosting annual fundraisers, and (6) open lines of daily communication with families.
- Specialized training is crucial in providing proper care to children with special needs.
- Holistic care is one of the greatest benefits of therapists being part of the care team in medically prescribed daycares.

Implications for Occupational Therapy

- The daycare setting allows therapists to be more informed of all of a child's abilities, needs, and supports by seeing them daily.
- Occupational therapists are excellent candidates to train providers in specialized care, and for adapting activities to maximize each child's ability to participate.
- Therapists in this setting can be much more client-centered and occupation-based as their interactions occur directly within a child's natural environment addressing all pertinent aspects of a child's day.
- When working with children, occupational therapists can intervene at a time optimal for growth and learning, making early intervention services critical to helping children reach their maximum potential.

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