



# PLAY'S THE THING: HOW OCCUPATIONAL THERAPY PROGRAMS TEACH PLAY AS AN OCCUPATION

Findings from a Descriptive Study of US-Based  
Entry-Level OT Programs

Lisa Raymond-Tolan, OTD, OTR/L

# PLAY IS AN OCCUPATION

The American Occupational Therapy Association declares play is a key occupation and a core context for development and learning.

UN Convention on the Rights of the Child Article 31 recognizes every child's right to play.

Play is one of the primary ways children learn and develop essential skills

- Gross & fine motor,
- cognitive,
- socioemotional,
- self-regulation,
- language,
- executive function,
- fostering prosocial behavior

# OT & PLAY RESEARCH

How do OT programs teach play?

- New Zealand
- Australia
- Canada
- Ireland
- Sweden
- Switzerland
- United States

How do OT practitioners use play in practice?

- Most often use play as a *tool* (modality) to improve motor skills rather than as an *end goal* (occupation).
- OTs identified a lack of education focused on play as a possible barrier

# THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

- Occupational Justice
- Self-Determination Theory (SDT)
- Transactional Perspective
- Play-as-Means vs. Play-as-End

# METHODOLOGY

## PARTICIPANTS

59 respondents

- Pediatric Faculty,
- Program Directors,
- Chairs
- from US-based OT and OTA programs

## STUDY DESIGN

Descriptive survey  
delivered via  
Qualtrics

## DATA POINTS

- Timing of play education in the curriculum
- Types of play assessments taught
- Instructional methods and observation settings

# WHEN IS PLAY TAUGHT?

- **Consistency Across Programs:** Most programs introduce play concepts during the first year (66%) or second year (68%) of didactic coursework.
- **Integration:** Play is most frequently taught within "Pediatrics" courses (91.5%) and "Human Development" (45.8%).
- **Key Finding:** Play is established early as a fundamental concept, but its complexity is layered throughout the curriculum.

# WHAT ASSESSMENTS ARE TAUGHT?

- **Main Assessments:**
  - **Test of Playfulness (ToP):** 89% of programs.
  - **Revised Knox Preschool Play Scale:** 61% of programs.
  - **Test of Environmental Supportiveness (TOES):** 22% of programs.
- Focus on observing the *quality* and *developmental stage* of play.
- Motor-based assessments (like the BOT-2 or Peabody) are still frequently mentioned in the context of play

# OBSERVATION OPPORTUNITIES

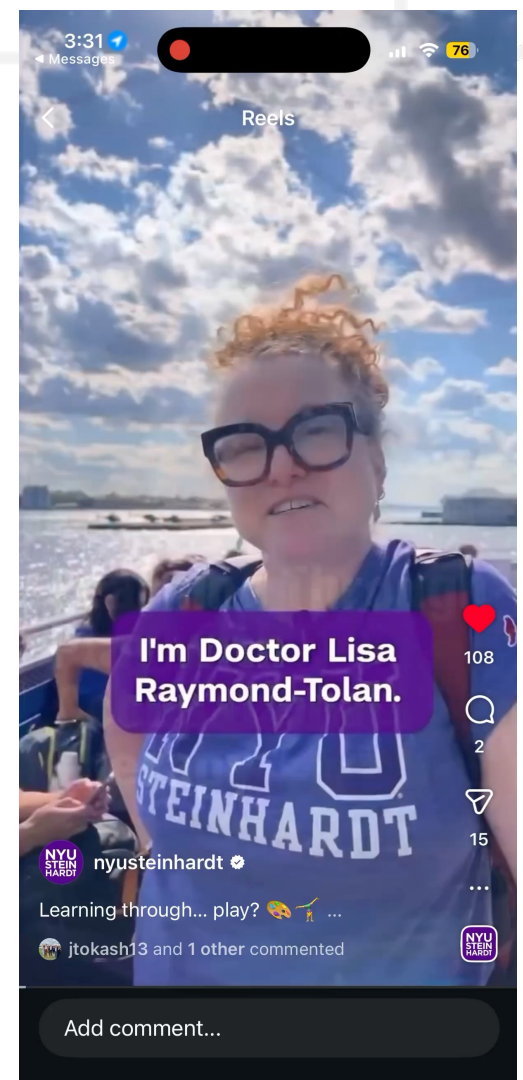
- **Primary Locations:**
  - **78%** observe in traditional playgrounds/parks.
  - **51%** observe in preschools or daycares.
  - **49%** observe in pediatric outpatient clinics.
- **The Missing Piece:** Very few programs (3%) utilize "Adventure Playgrounds" or truly unstructured, high-risk play environments.

# DISCUSSION

- **High Value, Limited Time:** Programs recognize play as a central occupation but struggle to fit it into crowded curricula.
- **The "Modality" Trap:** While schools teach play as an occupation, fieldwork and clinical settings often pull students back toward "play-as-a-modality."
- **Need for Diversity:** Observation settings are often adult-directed (clinics/schools) rather than child-led (free play).

# FUTURE DIRECTIONS

- Update research with practicing OTs to see if education is translating to clinical change.
- Increase exposure to unstructured play (like adventure playgrounds) to help students see play without adult interference.



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**If play is the "work" of  
childhood, OT  
education must  
continue to champion  
it as a primary  
outcome.**



# QUESTIONS?

[LISA.TOLAN@NYU.EDU](mailto:LISA.TOLAN@NYU.EDU)

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