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## Writing Team-Based IEP Goals To Promote Participation in School-Based Settings

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### Introduction

Individualized education program (IEP) goals and objectives are the most important criteria used to measure educational outcomes for children receiving occupational therapy in school settings. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004 (IDEA) places increased emphasis on the need for measurable annual goals so that school teams can be more systematic in ensuring desired student outcomes. The purpose of this article is to discuss the current knowledge about goal-writing practices in school settings and inform school-based practitioners how to write functional, relevant goals that are occupation based, student centered, measurable, and team based.

### Clinical Reasoning Essential When Developing Effective Student IEPs

Decisions about occupational therapy services in schools require therapists to make judgments based on clinical reasoning, as well as mandates set forth by state and federal guidelines. The *Occupational Therapy Practice Framework: Domain and Process, 2nd Edition (Framework-II)* (American Occupational Therapy Association [AOTA], 2008) and IDEA provide essential guidance to practitioners working in schools. Many principles of the *Framework-II* parallel federal mandates directing public school agencies. Occupational therapy promotes health and participation through engagement in occupation. Addressing areas of occupation (e.g., learning, play, leisure, recreation, self-care), as defined by the *Framework-II*, is important for the functional success of children in schools (AOTA, 2008).

IDEA ensures that all children with disabilities are provided with educational supports that meet their unique needs, including preparation for further education, employment, and/or independent living. The IEP details a child's present level of academic achievement and functional performance and outlines measurable annual goals. IDEA describes functional performance as the achievement of necessary skills required for children with disabilities to increase performance and independence in school,

home, and community settings; recreational and leisure interests; as well as postsecondary and work opportunities (IDEA, 2004). Occupational therapy, as a related service under IDEA, addresses occupational areas that support a student's functional participation in school roles, routines, and activities. IDEA specifies that educational teams, including family and caregivers, are to collaboratively develop IEPs for children with disabilities. Similarly, the *Framework-II* promotes collaboration with the client, family, and significant others throughout assessment, intervention, and outcome planning (AOTA, 2008). Occupational therapy involves the client and/or caregivers and educational staff in the IEP process by gaining an understanding of the child's and family's needs and priorities.

### Educationally Relevant Assessment and IEP Development

The occupational therapist conducts school-based evaluations to gather data about students' functional performance. Since the evaluations are designed to measure a student's functional school performance, the result should be functional student goals. The occupational therapy evaluation helps the school team to answer the following questions: (1) What are the performance expectations and priorities for a child in this particular school program (academic and participation requirements)? (2) Are there occupational factors impeding the student's ability to meet performance expectations? (3) Is occupational therapy support needed for the student to accomplish academic and/or participation priorities? To answer these questions effectively, the occupational therapist must select evaluation methods that gather the targeted information about student performance and priorities within his or her school program. Standardized tests (typically based on developmental norms) can help answer question 2, but they are not designed to answer questions 1 and 3. The School Function Assessment (SFA; Coster, Deeney, Haltiwanger, & Haley, 1998) and the School Version of the

Would you say that most occupational therapists write measurable, student-centered, and functional goals in IEP plans? Why, or why not? Share your experiences in the EISSIS Forum at <http://otconnections.aota.org/forums/17.aspx>.

Assessment of Motor and Process Skills (School AMPS; Fisher, Bryze, Hume, & Griswold, 2007) are designed to measure specific areas of student occupational performance in the school context. Although these tools are considerably different in design and scope, they are designed to help answer all of the important evaluation questions.

Another important component of effective evaluations is to gather information about the team members' priorities and preferences for the student's IEP. The SFA and the School AMPS include methods for collecting information from the student's team. However, these tools do not consider the student's or parents' priorities or preferences. The Canadian Occupational Performance Measure (COPM; Law et al., 2005), the Perceived Efficacy and Goal Setting System (PEGS; Missiuna, Pollock, & Law, 2004), and the Children's Assessment of Participation and Enjoyment/Preferences for Activities of Children (CAPE/PAC; King et al., 2004) are three assessment tools that gather information from the student and/or parental point of view. These tools help answer questions 1 and 3, since they gather information about the student's priorities.

Goals written as a result of well-designed school evaluations are much more likely to reflect the educational relevance required by IDEA. Furthermore, active participation with the IEP team process also helps ensure that service providers understand how to promote student access, participation, and progress within the curriculum in the least restrictive environment. Procedural and systems challenges, including scheduling conflicts, heavy workloads, and inconsistent communication, can impede occupational therapy practitioners' active participation in the IEP team process (Giangreco, 1995). Despite these practice issues, it remains critical that occupational therapy practitioners understand the characteristics of meaningful and functional annual student goals, which are directly linked to the manner in which school-based evaluations are designed and implemented.

## Writing High Quality Functional Goals

Literature greatly supports the notion that functionality is a vital component when developing IEP goals. For example, pediatric therapists agree that goals and objective content should relate to functional skills, use an identifiable method of measurement, and link directly to an educational benefit and educational environment (Dole, Arvidson, Byrne, Robbins, & Schasberger, 2003). Investigation of pediatric specialists in occupational and physical therapy shows therapists agree that context specificity, measurability, and focus on life skills or academic tasks are critical characteristics for writing quality goals, yet all three of these items are not included in most goals (McConlogue & Quinn, 2009). Recent evidence also suggests that many goals written for students lack essen-

tial components. For example, Boavida, Aguiar, McWilliam, and Serpa Pimentel (2010) examined IEP goals and objectives against quality indicators. They found low percentages for goals and objectives describing functionality, generality, context, measurability, and hierarchical relations. Furthermore, therapists tend to develop their own goals rather than collaborate with the child's educational team (Spencer, Turkett, Vaughn, & Koenig, 2006). Ketelaar, Vermeer, Hart, van Petegem-van Beek, and Helders (2001) found that functional programs enhance students' functional skills more than remedial procedures. Consequently, functional programs may provide more meaning and purpose to both clients and therapists. Therapists working in schools, however, continue to frequently emphasize sensory or motor function and follow a developmental or remedial approach (McConlogue & Quinn, 2009; Spencer et al., 2006). Consensus exists among pediatric therapists that functional, collaborative goals are essential to best practice; however, goals continue to be written in isolation and focus on remediation rather than participation.

Current evidence provides guidance for determining what to include in IEP goals. Several articles have outlined the necessary components for writing functional, client-centered goals (Boavida et al., 2010; Dole et al., 2003; McConlogue & Quinn, 2009; McWilliam, 2008). Consistently, the literature supports a collaborative approach in which therapists discuss goals with other team members, including teachers, families, and other therapists (Clark, 2005; Handley-Moore, 2008; Randall & McEwen, 2000). Additionally, teams must define desired behaviors, identify the conditions under which the behaviors occur, and establish criteria for mastery. McWilliam (2008) provided supporting evidence represented by a reference table of 80 early intervention goals developed from the Routines-Based Interview. Each of these goals describes an informal goal, an observable goal or outcome, and how one will know that the child has accomplished the goal. Using collaborative strategies enables the therapist and team to write functional goals with consideration of desired behaviors, multiple contexts, and measurement for mastery.

Important IEP goal content can be represented by organizing the elements into three areas: measurability, educational relevance, and content (Dole et al., 2003). Clark (2005) and McWilliam (2006) provided guidance and similar analysis to construct functional student-centered outcomes. The following section provides a summary of concepts found to be important in creating high quality functional outcomes. Table 1 provides an example of two goals that represent all three concept areas.

## Measurability

Goals should have a measurement component indicating how teams will know the child has achieved the behavior or skill. Measurement should specify criteria for achievement by indicating the required level of independence or cuing, accuracy, or percentage of opportunities. Teams can also add additional criteria and conditions such as generalization, fluency, or maintenance in order to demonstrate a behavior or skill across routines, peoples, or materials. Dole et al. (2003) also recommended using a valid and acceptable measurement tool to ensure that all team members can reliably measure the goal.

## Educational Relevance

Collaborating with team members and using functional assessments allow teams to understand what the student needs to do; better define the desired behavior or skill in various school contexts; and guide the content for writing functional, school-related goals. Goals and objectives should enhance school function, relate directly to school and classroom curriculum or requirements, assist in gaining benefit from educational setting and placement, and be associated with general school activities.

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**Table 1. Essential Components of Functional Goals**

|  | Goal Areas   |   |
|--|--|---|
|  | Eating Lunch   | Handwriting   |
| <b>Collaboration</b>                           | After talking with the child's teacher and mom, you learn that he has difficulty going through the lunch line with his classroom peers, and this is something him mom would like him to do.  | The child's mom would like her to be able to complete homework assignments with less help. The teacher reports that the child has difficulty copying assignments from the board and filling out her daily agenda.                     |
| <b>Measurability/<br/>Criteria for Mastery</b> | The child is able to independently collect his lunch and choose a seat in the cafeteria using adaptive equipment as needed on 3 of 5 consecutive days for 4 weeks.   | The child is able to fill out her daily agenda using needed adaptive strategies on 4 consecutive school days for 4 weeks.   |
| <b>Educational<br/>Relevance</b>               | Participation in the lunchroom is a school activity in which students participate on a daily basis.  | This skill will increase the student's independence in classroom participation.   |
| <b>Context</b>                                 | In the lunchroom with classroom peers  | At the end of every school day when the class writes assignments in their agendas.  |
| <b>Goal</b>                                    | In order to increase participation in lunchtime activities using adaptive equipment (i.e., tray with handles, PECS symbol of food choice), [Child] will independently collect his lunch and choose a seat in the cafeteria on 3 of 5 consecutive days for 4 weeks. | In order to increase independence in classroom participation, [Child] will write assignments in her daily agenda using adaptive strategies as needed (i.e., near point copy, adapted paper) on 4 consecutive school days for 4 weeks. |

### Content

To connect goal content to a functional need, make goals and objectives child focused, write the skill or behavior as an action verb (i.e., “eating,” “walking”), and indicate routines or the environment in which the activity will occur (McWilliam, 2006). The goals should be feasible and achievable, with content that is clear and specific, jargon-free, and easily understood by all involved.

### Conclusion

IEP team-based goals that have educational relevance are measurable and designate a functional student skill. These kinds of goals best communicate what a child needs in order to participate in his or her school and community (Clark, 2005; Coster et al., 1998; Dole et al., 2003; McWilliam, 2006, 2008).

Occupational therapists should consider the following questions when reviewing goal writing procedures in school settings:

- What is the functional purpose of the goal or objective? Is the skill or behavior needed to complete or participate in school activities and routines?
- Does the goal relate to what is needed for the student to be successful in the context of school or does it focus on specific developmental skills? Does it relate back to the needs listed as priorities in the present level of academic achievement and functional performance?

- Is it child-centered—stating what the *child* will be able to do?
- Is it family friendly and written in terms that can be understood by parents and caregivers, or does it contain jargon?
- Can it be observed and measured during the child's normal school day?
- Is there a specific criterion or method for measurement that will demonstrate that a child has achieved the skill or behavior? ■

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