

# STUDENT DOCTORAL Experiential Capstone Projects





Dear WNE OTD Family and Friends:

We are excited to produce this third annual edition of EDUCATE-ENGAGE-EMPOWER to showcase our doctoral experiential capstone program and student projects. Our aim is to better familiarize you with our faculty, staff, and students so that you can continue to be a part of our endeavors.

The Doctoral Experiential (DEx) Capstone Project is a complex interrelated field experience and scholarly project that is coordinated by a student in collaboration with a university and community team. The purpose of the DEx Capstone is for students to apply the knowledge and skills gained during their OTD academic courses, labs, and fieldwork experiences in ways that challenge and perhaps transform the delivery of health, educational, and social services. Through designing and implementing a community experiential and a scholarly project that specifically responds to the needs of a population and setting, students experience the roles of reflective practitioner, transformative leader, and innovative designer.

Students complete 14 weeks of work with a community organization during the DEx Capstone. Community organizations include hospitals, clinics, schools, health care, social service, advocacy, or educational organizations. WNE OTD students work in groups of four or five students with a faculty mentor. Depending on the topic, population, and setting they choose, they work with one or more "site mentors" or collaborators. In a typical year, students learn about the organization's population, setting, strengths, and challenges, and they participate in daily activities. Students also conduct a scholarly project designed to answer a question generated from a needs assessment, literature review, and collaboration with faculty, site, and peer mentors. The intentions of both the community experiential and the scholarly project are to establish a meaningful connection between WNE and the community, to improve health, education, and social services, and to explore potentially transformative roles for occupational therapists. The ultimate aim of the capstone experience is for our students to apply this concentrated knowledge, skill set, and intrinsic development to emerge as OT practitioners beyond a novice level to impact communities in addition to individuals and groups.

The following pages offer descriptions of our faculty mentors, acknowledge our community partners, and illustrate our 2025 student projects. We are so very grateful to all who engage with our program as educators, mentors, reviewers, and consultants. Thank you for your support and contribution to the community and to the profession of occupational therapy.



Debra Latour, OT, PP-OTD, M.Ed., OTR, FAOTA  
Doctoral Capstone Coordinator

# 2025 WNE OTD Faculty Mentors and Mentorship Groups



## **Brittany Adams, OT, OTD, MS, OTR**

Emily Labrie, OT/s  
Brooke McKeon, OT/s  
Leo Readey, OT/s



## **Kim Geisner-Gross, OT, OTD, M.Ed., CHT, CKTP, OTR**

Courtney Colaccio, OT/s  
Elizabeth Melvin, OT/s  
Joseph Russo, OT/s



## **Debra Latour, OT, PP-OTD, M.Ed., OTR, FAOTA**

Alexandria Kulman, OT/s  
Jordyn Robertson, OT/s



## **Alexis Morin, OT, OTD, MOT, OTR**

Jordan Fazio, OT/s  
Juliet Lunden, OT/s  
Chelsea Monpas, OT/s  
Kimberly Santos, OT/s



## **Erin Murray, OT, OTD, OTR**

Brooke Mazzarelli, OT/s  
Marley Nissenbaum, OT/s



## **Erin Wells, OT, OTD, MSOT, OTR**

EllaGrace Brunton, OT/s  
Brianna McCollum, OT/s  
Kehinde Olasehinde, OT/s

# Thank you to our 2025 partnering sites and site mentors

Allied Community Programs, Enfield, CT  
Boys and Girls Club of Webster-Dudley, Dudley, MA  
Camp Casco, Sudbury, MA  
Cancer House of Hope, West Springfield, MA  
Criterion Child Enrichment, Milford, MA  
Gandara Center, Springfield, MA  
Handspring Clinical Services: NY, CO, UT  
Holyoke Community College MGM Culinary Arts Institute, Holyoke, MA  
Pomperaug Youth Baseball – Bambino Buddy Ball, Southbury, CT  
The Garden: A Center for Grieving Children and Teens, Northampton, MA  
The Sound School, New Haven, CT

Billie-Jean Griffin, MBA  
Kristin Mayotte  
Krystin Whitacre  
Margaret Toomey  
Tania Mendez-Gross MSOT, OTR  
Laura Katzenberger, CP, LP  
Shelly Bathe Lenn, M.Ed, C.A.G.S  
Peter Solomon

## Thank you to our 2025 WNE site mentors

Brittany Adams OT, OTD, MS, OTR  
Lauren Dansereau MSN, ANP-BC  
Alexis Morin OT, OTD, MOT, OTR  
Erin Murray OT, OTD-PP, OTR/L  
Michael Salemi, OT, OTD, OTR  
Erin Wells, OT, OTD, MSOT, OTR

## Thank you to our supportive staff

Justina Aubrey, Justin Eck

## Stay tuned for our upcoming projects!

[wne.edu/pharmacy-and-health-sciences/departments/occupational-therapy/dex-projects](http://wne.edu/pharmacy-and-health-sciences/departments/occupational-therapy/dex-projects)



# Optimizing Inpatient and Emergency Care for Pediatric Healthcare Patients with Disabilities and/or Diverse Health Needs

BY ELLAGRACE BRUNTON, OT/S

"Advocacy is not just a task for charismatic individuals or high-profile community organizers. Advocacy is for all of us; advocacy is a way of life. It is a natural response to the injustices and inequality in the world."

— Alice Wong, Disability Visibility: First-Person Stories from the Twenty-First Century

Advocacy is at the heart of occupational therapy, shaping its holistic approach to healthcare by providing tailored support to individuals and communities. Doctoral candidate EllaGrace Brunton embraces this mission in her capstone project, Optimizing Pediatric Healthcare, which focuses on education, empowerment, and resource development to improve healthcare experiences for children with disabilities and diverse health needs.

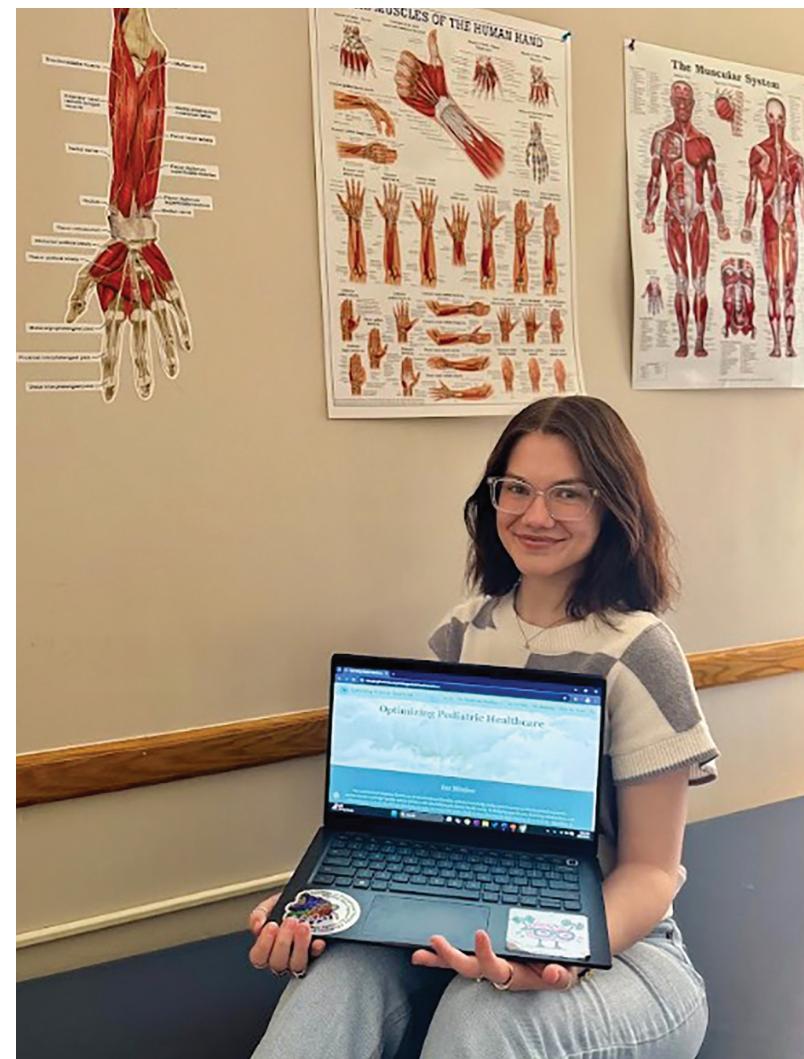
In 2023, 3.22 million children have a diagnosis of autism and/or intellectual disabilities, while 2.88 million have been diagnosed with developmental delays (RISP, 2023). These children face significant barriers to equitable healthcare outcomes and experiences compared to their neurotypical and typically developing peers. Many healthcare providers often have limited knowledge about caring for this population, encounter challenges in accessing appropriate resources, and work in hospital environments that may lack inclusive design standards.

To address these gaps, EllaGrace and her faculty mentor, Dr. Erin Wells, developed the Optimizing Pediatric Health Care Experiences—a multifaceted initiative to foster more inclusive medical experiences. Through an IRB-approved survey distributed to twenty organizations across MA and CT, EllaGrace gathered insights from parents of children with disabilities on their experiences in emergency departments and inpatient stays. This needs assessment informed the creation of sensory toolkits designed for hospital settings, enhancing the healthcare experiences of these children.

Additionally, she created continuing education modules for pediatric providers, covering sensory strategies, inclusive and universal design principles, and trauma-informed care approaches. To further support families, she distributed health literacy and advocacy resources, empowering them to navigate medical environments with increased confidence. By integrating these resources into a sustainable strategic model, Optimizing Pediatric Healthcare is helping bridge the gap in care, ensuring children with disabilities and diverse health needs receive equitable and compassionate healthcare experiences.

## References:

1. Wong, A. (Ed.). (2020). Disability visibility: First-person stories from the twenty-first century.
2. Residential Information Systems Project. (2023). RISP Infographic People with IDD. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, RISP, Research and Training Center on Community Living, Institute on Community Integration. Retrieved from: <https://risp.umn.edu>



# Beyond the Sound: Exploring the Therapeutic Benefits of Ocean Therapy for Neurological Rehabilitation

BY COURTNEY COLACCIO, OT/S

A groundbreaking new initiative is making waves at The Sound School in New Haven. Ocean Therapy, a program designed to educate high school students while working with patients with neurological related challenges officially launched this spring in the Foote Building at the end of South Water Street. Led by occupational therapy student Courtney Colaccio, this project aims to harness the therapeutic benefits of the ocean to improve participants' physical, cognitive, and emotional well-being.

The club is part of Colaccio's Doctoral Experiential (DEx) Capstone Project, a culmination of her academic and professional training in her occupational therapy education. The program serves adult community members who experience neurological conditions and integrates ocean-based activities with rehabilitation techniques to promote overall wellness. "The ocean has a unique ability to heal and inspire," Colaccio explained. "Through this club, we hope to provide a supportive and engaging space where participants can build confidence, develop skills, and experience the therapeutic power of water."

The interventions incorporate a range of ocean-centered activities, including mindfulness exercises by the shore, education on waterfront safety and accessibility, stretching and deep breathing, and sensory integration in the state-of-the-art fish production laboratory. By merging occupational therapy principles with marine environments, the program strengthens motor skills, sensory processing, and emotional regulation. Each session is designed to be interactive and adaptable, ensuring that participants of varying abilities can fully participate.

"After chair yoga and deep breathing, two participants said they felt more relaxed and calmer leaving the session than they were coming in," Colaccio shared. "Stretching is helping upper extremity range of motion, with one participant sharing he was able to put his jacket on by himself for the first time."



Ocean Therapy also includes an educational component for high school students. The Waves of Wellness Club allows students that have an interest in higher education, healthcare careers, or special education to work one on one with these participants. The inaugural session featured an engaging presentation on multiple sclerosis and other neurological diagnoses. The discussion included interactive elements such as a game to reinforce learning in a fun and accessible way.

With its innovative approach and enthusiastic reception, Ocean Therapy is set to become a transformative force in the field of neurological rehabilitation. As the group continues to grow, Colaccio and The Sound School team remain committed to helping community members harness the ocean's power—one wave at a time.





## Finding Balance While Becoming an Occupational Therapy Practitioner

BY JORDAN FAZIO, COTA, OTA, OT/S

Maintaining occupational balance and emotional intelligence becomes crucial as occupational therapy (OT) students navigate the demands of didactic coursework, fieldwork placements, and professional development. The Wellness Circle is a six-session group designed to provide OT students with practical strategies to foster self-awareness, resilience, and sustainable well-being throughout their education and future careers.

The Wellness Circle was developed in response to the growing need for mental and emotional well-being resources within OT programs. The sessions were structured to help students explore

their occupational balance, understand the role of emotional intelligence in clinical practice, and develop skills that promote long-term professional sustainability. Each session provided guided discussions, hands-on activities, and reflective exercises to help students assess their well-being and cultivate habits that support their roles and routines.

The Wellness Circle was offered to entry-level Doctor of Occupational Therapy (OTD) students at Western New England University, creating a supportive and engaging environment where participants share experiences and learn from one another. Through structured interventions, students identified areas of occupational imbalance and developed personalized strategies to enhance their wellness.

One member stated, "These weekly meetings give me something to look forward to and remind me that I have an outlet to connect with other students going through similar things as me."

Another member stated, "This group is amazing and so important for students! Mental health crises have been on the rise, especially among college students, so I am happy to be a part of such an important topic."

The inspiration for The Wellness Circle stemmed from Jordan Fazio's experiences as an occupational therapy assistant (OTA) student, where she witnessed the impact of burnout. She observed how her fieldwork educators' emotional and physical exhaustion not only affected them as a practitioner but also shaped her learning experience. Recognizing the need for proactive self-care from students to practitioners, She was motivated to create a space where students could develop strategies for resilience early in their careers. Beyond fostering individual well-being, her goal was to build a sense of community for students to network.

Initiatives like The Wellness Circle should serve as an essential steppingstone toward a well-balanced profession. Moving forward, she hopes to expand this program and integrate it into a variety of asynchronous materials that OT students can utilize to make wellness an ongoing priority in the field.



## Understanding and Supporting Psychosocial Health and Sensory Regulation in Children with Cancer (or Cancer History)

BY ALEXANDRA KULMAN, ATC, LAT, OT/S

For 2025, the American Cancer Society research team predicted in total, there will be approximately 9,550 new childhood cancer cases, the equivalent of about 26 cases each day. The rate of survival has increased to 85% of children diagnosed with cancer living more than 5 years.<sup>2</sup> Research shows children diagnosed with cancer and children with a cancer history have psychosocial health problems such as higher rates of anxiety and depression, and trouble forming friendships or relationships due to the missed life experiences and lack of normalcy.<sup>1,3,4</sup>

Camp Casco is a place where children who are diagnosed with cancer, or survivors, as well as their siblings go to let loose and experience the magic of summer camp. They offer three different programs during the summer: oncology camp for children diagnosed with cancer or history of cancer, the sibling camp for siblings of children with cancer, and the day camp for siblings and children diagnosed with cancer and cancer survivors. When speaking to staff members at the capstone site, it was discovered there is a high need for support and increased knowledge of sensory regulation and sensory dysregulation. "The campers are incredible, and working with them is so rewarding" said one counselor.

Alexandra Kulman wanted her capstone to focus on how psychosocial health symptoms for children diagnosed with cancer could be decreased using recreation, wellness, and leisure activities. She also wanted to focus on how sensory regulation is important and can affect a child's ability to participate in activities. Through her own experience with summer camps, Kulman embraced the idea that summer camps are for everyone, and wanted to help show the importance of and impact summer camps have on children fighting cancer as well as cancer survivors.

Her program focused on understanding the knowledge camp leadership has about psychosocial and sensory regulation, and then how her program can best support and educate the camp leadership on how accessible and inclusive activities can have an impact on the children. Kulman created materials to help provide sensory regulation strategies and understand what psychosocial health is and how it specifically affects children with cancer and survivors. She also attended camp meetings and spoke with counselors to understand more about their experience and the campers' experience from the staff's point of view. Kulman surveyed camp leadership and camp counselors to understand what symptoms of psychosocial health are seen and hopefully decreased by the end of camp.

Overall, the 14 weeks allowed Kulman the opportunity to collaborate and create materials to better understand and support the psychosocial and sensory needs of children with cancer and survivors. Kulman's project also allowed the camp with the opportunity to gain more understanding about the impact they have on the children.

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1. Baker, K. S., & Syrjala, K. L. (2018). Long-term complications in adolescent and young adult leukemia survivors. *Hematology. American Society of Hematology. Education Program*, 2018(1), 146–153. <https://doi.org/10.1182/asheducation-2018.1.146>
2. Childhood cancer. (n.d.). American Cancer Society. <https://www.cancer.org/cancer/childhood-cancer.html>
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4. McDonnell, G., Baily, C., Schuler, T., & Verdeli, H. (2015). Anxiety among adolescent survivors of pediatric cancer: A missing link in the survivorship literature. *Palliative & Supportive Care*, 13(2), 345–349. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1478951514000297>

# Holistic Healing: Advancing Psychosocial Cancer Care Through Occupational Therapy

BY EMILY LABRIE, OT/S

In 2025, an estimated 2,041,910 cancer diagnoses will be given in the United States (American Cancer Society, 2025). With continued developments in cancer research, this increased number of diagnoses also leads to a growing number of cancer survivors. In the depths of countless medical appointments, chemotherapy, surgery, and radiation, however, it is the person behind the diagnosis that so often remains unaddressed. What better way to empower the person behind the diagnosis than through a profession built on holistic, person-centered care: occupational therapy (OT)?

Emily Labrie, a third-year Doctor of Occupational Therapy student at Western New England University (WNE), recently partnered with the Cancer House of Hope (CHH) in West Springfield, MA, to implement her Doctoral Capstone project (Center for Human Development, 2025). Under the mentorship of CHH Program Director, Margaret Toomey, Labrie offered pro bono occupational therapy services for 14 weeks to CHH members living with and beyond cancer.

To bring awareness of OT to the CHH, an educational screening form was developed, which enabled members to identify areas in their daily lives that are currently affected by their cancer diagnosis or treatment. Labrie then met with CHH members individually to conduct a thorough evaluation, including assessments of physical and mental health. Based on these findings, areas of need were prioritized and goals for OT were set.

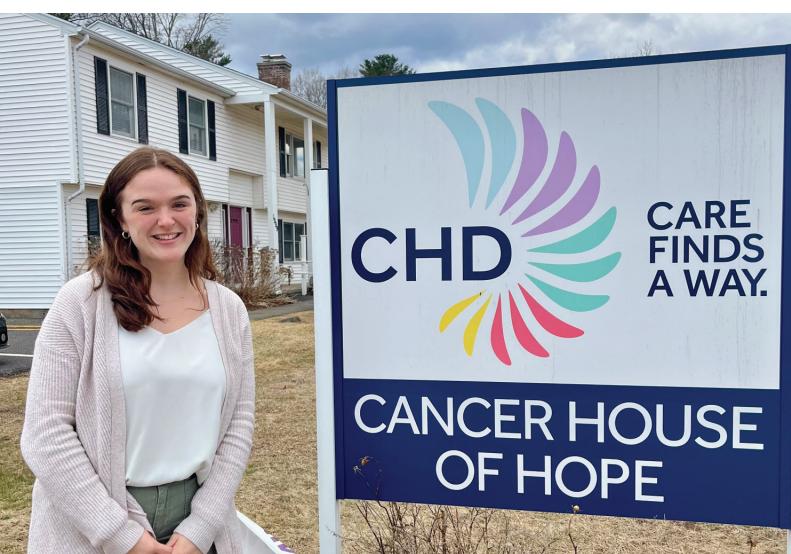
In her time at the Cancer House of Hope, Labrie provided OT services to a total of seven members at different points in their cancer journey, consisting of seven evaluations, 19 treatment sessions, and six formal discharges. Some sessions were more relaxed in nature, supporting members with coping strategies to manage the emotional component of their diagnosis, whereas other sessions were more active, like completing simulated laundry tasks and balance activities. "OT is a client-centered practice, so we always meet people where they are currently. What is important to them is important to us," said Labrie. One member who received services from Labrie reported that sessions addressing her strength and balance were, "...not boring and laborious. They were fun." Several members also expressed satisfaction seeing their improvements following OT, with one individual stating, "I increased my social outings and take care of myself more."

At the end of her 14 weeks at the Cancer House of Hope, Labrie hopes to have made a lasting impact. Her long-term goal is to see occupational therapy become one of the services offered to community members at the Cancer House of Hope on a regular basis.

Emily's passion for occupational therapy in cancer care emerged when her mother was diagnosed with Stage IV Uterine Cancer in 2023. At many points, she saw gaps in her mother's care that could have been filled by the presence of an OT. She hopes that her time at the Cancer House of Hope not only influenced the members she worked with, but also that there will be an increased awareness of the benefits that occupational therapy can bring for people living with and beyond cancer.

## References:

1. American Cancer Society. (2025). Cancer facts and figures 2025. [Data set]. Atlanta: American Cancer Society. <https://www.cancer.org/research/cancer-facts-statistics/all-cancer-facts-figures/2025-cancer-facts-figures.html>
2. Center for Human Development. (2025). Cancer House of Hope. <https://chd.org/programs-services/community-care-support/cancer-support-services-springfield-ma/>



# Thrive Together: Implementation of Trauma-Informed Care Education for After School Program Staff to Enhance Protective Factors Among At-Risk Youth

BY JULIET LUNDEN, OT/S

The Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) reports that one in five high school students have experienced four or more adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), such as abuse, neglect, or household dysfunction (e.g., close family who are incarcerated, experience mental health challenges, intimate partner violence, and divorce)[1]. Youth who have experienced four or more ACEs are at higher risk for developmental delays, mental health challenges, difficulties in school, struggles to make and maintain healthy relationships, and engagement in high-risk behaviors such as substance abuse, risky and earlier sexual engagement, and suicidal ideation and intent [2]. After school programs (ASP) often serve as a safe haven for youth, providing a supportive environment where they can build positive relationships with adults, develop social-emotional skills, and learn from mistakes without fear of judgment. Organizations such as the Boys and Girls Club of America are frequently located in limited-income and diverse communities, where they primarily serve youth who are considered at-risk due to various socioeconomic and diversity challenges [3]. Despite the vulnerable population, ASP staff typically lack evidence-based trauma-informed care training, leading to potential misinterpretations of trauma-based behaviors as defiance or disengagement.

Juliet Lunden, a Doctor of Occupational Therapy (OTD) Candidate at Western England University, wanted to bridge this gap by developing a trauma-informed care (TIC) training program for ASP staff at the Boys and Girls Club of Webster-Dudley located in Massachusetts.

The staff were educated on strategies and techniques to recognize and respond to youth experiencing a trauma or stress response. A six-session synchronous in-person program was facilitated, focusing on the following topics: understanding trauma: risk and protective factors in youth, impact of trauma on youth behavior and long term health outcomes, trauma-informed care strategies and building safety in the ASP, emotional regulation and co-regulation techniques, strengthening protective factors and building resilience in the ASP, and trauma-informed practices: ASP staff self-care and burnout prevention. Each session included case applications relevant to the population served at the ASP to help them apply the skills, as well as interactive activities to help the staff develop empathy and TIC skills.

Staff members who completed the training reported a significant increase in their understanding of trauma and how to respond effectively. Many staff noted a shift in how they viewed challenging behaviors, leading to more patience, empathy, and improved relational bonds with the youth they serve. "I feel as

though my role is a significant one because a lot of the youth look up to the staff as role models. I believe that by having someone like us who's achieving their [way] in college, they build a sense of self confidence to pursue their own goals. By being mindful of youth and using positive reinforcement, youth gain [a] deep level of trust and gain protective factors" explained a staff member who has taken the TIC training program.

This initiative is personal for Lunden, who spent four years working at the Boys and Girls Club before pursuing occupational therapy. "I've always been passionate about working with youth," said Lunden. "Their experiences and resilience were inspiring, I got to see firsthand how trauma can impact behavior, learning, and building relationships. I also got the privilege to see how giving the same youth access to a safe ASP, positive and compassionate adult relations, routine and structure, and empowerment and voice can help them grow and heal—this is why I brought this project into my OTD journey."

An additional component of Lunden's capstone project is the development and implementation of a sensory walk in a quiet hallway of the Boys and Girls Club. The sensory walk was designed to assist youth with regulating their emotions and energy levels, especially when engaging in high-activity areas that are overwhelming, such as the gym or game room. The walk provides an engaging and structured way for attending youth to reset emotionally and refocus when feeling overwhelmed, overstimulated, understimulated, or dysregulated. Lunden incorporated the same regulation strategies that staff were educated on during the TIC program to assist with promoting carryover of learned techniques.

As Lunden nears the completion of the OTD program, she hopes to disseminate her findings by submitting a proposal to various conferences including the 2026 AOTA Annual Conference and Expo, AOTA Specialty Conference: Children & Youth, and 2025 MAOT Annual Conference, as well as submit a manuscript to the Journal of Occupational Therapy Schools & Early Intervention.

For more information on implementing trauma-informed care techniques in the afterschool program setting or Juliet Lunden's work, please visit: <https://sites.google.com/view/julietlundenots/home>.

## References:

1. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. [CDC]. (2024). About adverse childhood experiences. <https://www.cdc.gov/aces/about/index.html>
2. Center to Advance Trauma Informed Health Care. (2025). How trauma affects our health. The Regents of the University of California San Francisco. <https://cthc.ucsf.edu/why-trauma/>
3. Boys and Girls Clubs of America. [BGCA]. (2022). 2022 annual report. [https://www.bgca.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/2022\\_Annual\\_Report\\_FINAL.pdf](https://www.bgca.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/2022_Annual_Report_FINAL.pdf)

# Cannabis: Its Place in Occupational Therapy

BY BROOKE MAZZARELLI, OT/S

As medical cannabis has become legalized in most states in the United States, there is a need for more studies and clinical trials focused on the effectiveness and possible adverse effects of cannabis for specific diagnoses. As part of her Doctoral Experiential Capstone, Western New England (WNE) occupational therapy student, Brooke Mazzarelli, OT/S, used an occupational therapy lens to identify and create materials focused on how cannabis can impact various mental and physical diagnosis, including stress/anxiety, chronic pain, sleep disorders, and appetite.

Mazzarelli stated, "The topic is personal to me. I have many friends and family members who struggle with different aspects of mental and physical health, with many on prescription medications that endure multiple side effects just to get some relief. I was interested in alternative medicines that may have the same relief effects without the long list of side effects, and that is when I discovered that cannabis has medicinal properties that address multiple medical concerns and that with the correct strain and dosing, has little to no adverse effects."

Mazzarelli worked to create a survey on the effectiveness of cannabis to be distributed at local dispensaries and on WNE campus to be completed by those that currently use cannabis as a primary relief method for stress and anxiety, chronic pain, sleep disorders, and appetite issues. The survey included questions on demographics, reason for use, effectiveness, strain, form, adverse effects, additional benefits, and stigma. This data was then analyzed to write an article that was submitted to Occupational Therapy in Health Care and develop educational materials for participating dispensaries and WNE OTD year 1 hybrid cohort.

The in-service developed for the WNE OTD year 1 hybrid cohort combined survey themes with current literature focused on various aspects of cannabis, current laws and regulations, and how occupational therapists can effectively address cannabis as an alternative treatment option with future clients. The students completed activities and engaged in open discussions throughout the in-service to strengthen their understanding and decrease possible stigma surrounding cannabis use. Using a word cloud, students were asked to identify client factors that cannabis could potentially affect. Some responses included values (31%), sleep (25%), pain (19%), mental health (19%), age (19%), and beliefs (44%). With a great response to the in-service, Mazzarelli submitted an article to OT Practice on the benefits of educating OT students on cannabis and alternative methods to better support future clients.

Extensive research and analysis of survey data highlighted the effectiveness cannabis has in decreasing symptoms of stress and anxiety, chronic pain, sleep disorders, and appetite issues. Many respondents listed increased focus (55.2) and mood (48.3%) as additional benefits. Other benefits reported included increased creativity, energy, productivity, exercise, meditation, socialization, and decrease in acute pain. Most adverse effects reported were due to incorrect dosing and could be avoided by increasing education on correct strains, forms, and doses for specific uses. By contributing to scholarly research and providing education to OT students, Mazzarelli hopes to decrease stigma and increase knowledge on how cannabis can have a role in the occupational therapy profession.



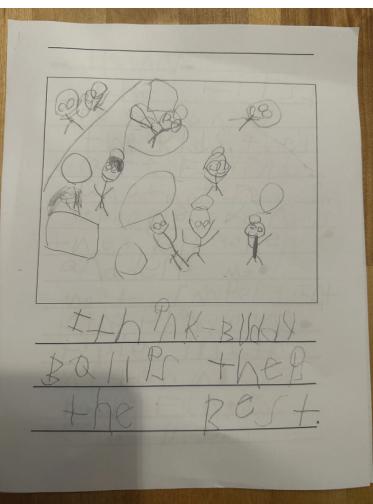
# The Value of Occupational Therapy in Designing Accessible and Inclusive Sports Programs

BY BRIANNA MCCOLLUM, OT/S

Participation in sport and recreation programs is not a privilege, but a fundamental right.

For many children, their best memories may have taken place on a sports field. These experiences build meaningful relationships with peers and coaches, increase confidence, and encourage effective collaboration and communication with others. We often take for granted the feeling and meaning that is associated with being a part of a team where you truly feel included. Every child deserves that feeling—the excitement, hearing your teammates cheer for you, and the sense of belonging that a sports team delivers.

For athletes with disabilities, there are significantly less opportunities to be a part of a sports team than children without disabilities. Physical activity levels are 4.5 times lower for youth with a disability, and the obesity rate is 38% higher for these children, according to the National Center on Health, Physical Activity & Disability (NCHPAD). Half of children with a disability quit sports by the age of 11 years old (Solomon, 2022).



In a 14-week capstone project, Brianna McCollum aimed at increasing the inclusivity and accessibility of Pomperaug Little Leagues Buddy Ball program by the creation and administration of an inclusive baseball manual that utilized an occupational therapy lens. While working with this program, McCollum also got the opportunity to create and implement a four-week inclusive after school program for Middlebury Elementary School with the goal of increasing socialization and motor development for children with and without disabilities. McCollum's Doctoral Experiential Capstone Project aims at emphasizing that participation in sports and recreation programs is not a privilege but a fundamental right—one that fosters social connection, self-confidence, and personal growth for all children.

There is a much larger role occupational therapy can offer to sports and recreation programs. By focusing on individual abilities and adaptive techniques and equipment, occupational therapists (OTs) can help ensure that children are able to fully participate in any type of sport. OTs can also play a role in facilitating socialization for children with disabilities, and youth sports are the perfect place to do it. The inclusive baseball manual and the after-school program plan focus on skills that would be worked on in an occupational therapy session but are designed to reflect the environment of a sports team and an after-school program. Both resources include activities for gross and fine motor development, sensory-friendly modifications and activities, and customized support strategies to make each activity accessible to all. Additionally, it provides guidance for coaches and volunteers on how to create an inclusive environment that encourages participation for every player.

Pictured first is the title page of a story written by a Buddy Ball player for a school assignment titled "I think Buddy Ball is the best" and second is two students during a craft session in the inclusive after school program.

## References:

1. Ma, Y., Liu, M., Liu, Y., Liu, D., & Hou, M. (2024). Exploring Physical Activity in Children and Adolescents with Disabilities: A Bibliometric Review of Current Status, Guidelines, Perceived Barriers, and Facilitators and Future Directions. *Healthcare* (Basel, Switzerland), 12(9), 934. <https://doi.org/10.3390/healthcare12090934>
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3. Solomon, J. (2022). For kids with disabilities, sports will return much more cautiously. Project Play. <https://projectplay.org/news/2020/6/15/for-kids-with-disabilities-sports-will-return-much-more-cautiously>

# Redefining Wellness in Primary and Urgent Care: Integrating Occupational Therapy into University Health Services

BY BROOKE MCKEON, OT/S

College life comes with much pressure—and it is starting to show. Around 85% of students say they feel overwhelmed by their responsibilities, and 40% report struggling with depression so severely it disrupts their daily lives (Goodman, 2019). However, students are not the only ones who experience these challenges; recent studies reveal faculty and staff often face the same difficulties with a third of professors reporting having symptoms of depression (Flannery, 2024). Constantly navigating transitions and juggling competing demands, many individuals are starting to speak up: the traditional approach to campus health is just not enough (Kreider, Bendixen & Lutz, 2015). While most colleges offer medical care and counseling, the growing complexity of student and staff needs points to a gap in services—and a potential opportunity. It is time to consider a new layer of support: bringing occupational therapy (OT) into primary and urgent care settings on campus.

Recognizing this alarming trend, doctoral candidate Brooke McKeon from Western New England University is acting with her capstone project aimed at integrating occupational therapy into the emerging area of urgent and primary care settings—specifically within campus health centers.

McKeon's project explored how OT can be the missing link in delivering truly holistic, accessible, and sustainable care to college students, faculty, and staff. Her work draws from a growing body of research showing that occupational therapists, traditionally seen in hospitals or rehab settings, have an essential role to play in outpatient and preventive care models.

Her research further highlights the value OT can bring—from helping students manage anxiety and academic stress, to establishing healthy routines in sleep, nutrition, and study habits, to reducing overall healthcare costs and improving care coordination through interprofessional collaboration.

Among the benefits identified in McKeon's research are improved patient satisfaction, reduced wait times, fewer unnecessary appointments, decreased organizational costs, improved job satisfaction, and decreased burnout among physicians.

To assess this model in action, McKeon embedded herself within a university health center, working directly alongside other healthcare providers to address student and staff well-being by providing occupational therapy services. Brooke worked with undergraduate students, graduate students, faculty, and staff to address a variety of concerns such as concussion management, post-surgical rehabilitation, ADHD, anxiety and depression, decreased sleep, vestibular difficulties, visual deficits, driving concerns, ergonomics, and more. She gathered pre- and post-integration data from staff and



patients to measure outcomes like service efficiency, satisfaction, and care access of OT in this emerging area.

Students and staff were quick to express the benefits. One student shared, "Occupational therapy really helped me start feeling better in class and at work. I was given resources that supported my recovery and helped me feel like myself again." Another echoed this impact, saying they were "very pleased with the progress [they] made using the program the OT student developed." Staff saw the difference, too. One team member remarked, "I feel like both we and the students have really benefited from having an OT here."

McKeon's capstone project does not just propose a solution—it builds one. Her goal is to make occupational therapy a permanent, visible fixture in primary and urgent care settings worldwide, starting with campus health centers.

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# Empowering Life After Loss: Investigating the usability, benefit, and limitations of a family centered self-guided grief workbook.

BY ELIZABETH MELVIN, OT/S



It is estimated that 6 million, or 1 in 12 children in the United States, will experience the loss of a parent or sibling by the age of 18 [1]. Bereavement impacts many children, but it is rarely addressed with children due to stigma, lack of resources, and lack of education. Bridging this gap in care was the foundation for Elizabeth Melvin's Doctoral Experiential (DEx) Capstone Project.

Elizabeth Melvin is a third year Doctor of Occupational Therapy student at Western New England University. Over the course of 14 weeks, Melvin has been exploring early childhood grief, access to resources for grieving children in schools and in the community, and the benefits and usability of a self-guided grief workbook. As part of her project, Melvin conducted a needs assessment, facilitated support groups in a local elementary school and in the community, and created and distributed copies of a guided grief workbook. Melvin began by conducting a needs assessment and review of current literature in the field to gain knowledge about how children grieve, resources currently available, and evidence-based interventions. This knowledge was applied to create a grief workbook with 50+ activities to help children cope with feelings of grief and loss. Copies of the workbook were printed and distributed to children in the community to be completed at home with their families. Copies were also distributed to professionals in the community who will be working with children with grief.

The activities from the workbook were also utilized in two six-week groups at Boland Elementary School and at The Garden: A Center for Grieving Children and Teens. The activities in these groups facilitated conversations about feelings and grief through imagery, colors, crafts, and games. The groups encourage collaboration, togetherness, and support among children who have had similar experiences.

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# Supporting Care Partners Of Individuals Impacted By Mental Illness Through An Occupational Therapy Perspective

BY CHELSEA MONPAS, OT/S

Fifty-three million American adults are currently acting as informal or unpaid caregivers to family members or friends (National Alliance for Caregiving, 2020). These caregivers provide care and support for a variety of conditions and diseases, including mental health conditions. The term "care partner" is more recently used to describe caregivers, as it provides more of a sense of equality and partnership. Rather than one person giving the care and the other receiving the care, care partners work together to ensure the best health for everyone involved (Feurich, 2023). While there is often support and resources for care partners of physical diagnoses, there is a significant lack of support for those that care for individuals with mental illness.

Chelsea Monpas, a third-year Doctor of Occupational Therapy student at Western New England University (WNE), set out to address this gap in care as her Doctoral Experiential Capstone Project. In preparation for this project, Monpas explored current research surrounding supports for family members and care partners of individuals with mental illness, stigma, impacts on occupational balance, and the current state of mental healthcare in New England, including western Massachusetts and Vermont. The research supported Monpas' hypothesis that more support is needed for family care partners of individuals impacted by mental illness.



After reviewing current evidence and conducting a needs assessment which included interviews with health care providers and mental health specialists, Monpas created a new program: Supporting Care Partners of Individuals Impacted by Mental Illness Through an Occupational Therapy Lens. Care partners participated in a six-week program with individual sessions once per week to address occupational balance, self-care, coping skills, and protective strategies. When describing the program, Monpas stated, "This program was designed to support the people who are always supporting others. When you are the primary person caring for someone with a mental health condition, your own mental health, occupational balance, and overall well-being are compromised. I wanted to create a program for these individuals to help them to learn that balance between their loved one's needs and their own and to prioritize their well-being."

The program participants ranged in age from 24-29 and were care partners for individuals with varying mental health conditions, such as depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder, substance use disorder, and bipolar disorder. In addition, all participants were currently enrolled in graduate level education. Dr. Alexis Morin, Monpas' faculty and site mentor, stated: "The silent heroes, care partners of individuals with mental illness, have been overlooked for years now. Chelsea is pioneering a transformative approach that equips care partners with the tools to reclaim their occupational identity and promote their occupational balance. Her work bridges a critical gap, empowering care partners to thrive not just in their care partner roles, but in their own lives. Observing Chelsea engage with care partners has been rewarding, as it's clear that each week she has made an impact in their lives."

Following her completion of the project and graduation from Western New England University, Monpas hopes that her Supporting Care Partners program can continue to be used by future students in WNE's Department of Occupational Therapy BearPaw Center, a student-run pro bono occupational therapy clinic. A guidebook and accompanying webpage with resources for additional care partner supports, coping skills and strategies, and educational materials on mental illness diagnoses were created by Monpas to outline the program and provide resources to future students of the occupational therapy department to support care partners.

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# Revolutionizing Education: How Ergonomic Classroom Modifications Are Boosting Student Comfort and Performance

BY MARLEY NISSENBAUM, OT/S

The young, bright-eyed student sat down for the first day of her Occupational Therapy graduate program. Her mind was racing, thoughts of the unknown filled her head alongside hopes for the future. She felt the hard plastic of the lecture hall chair press into her back and heard the incessant hum of the bright lights overhead. After spending much of her life in school, this was the last step in her educational journey before entering the “real world.” As a psychology major, she learned about the mental health epidemic that had been plaguing university students. She listened to the news and heard about students ending their lives due to high pressure and “burnout.” Burnout is a state of emotional, physical, and mental exhaustion resulting from prolonged or excessive stress. She had not yet experienced this phenomenon for herself, even though about 60% of all college students report having had that experience (Liu, 2023).

Flash forward to the end of the first semester of her Occupational Therapy program. During her first semester, she learned about the foundations of occupational therapy, including body positioning and ergonomics. Ergonomics: this is a term she had never heard of before. She learned about how to keep herself safe when lifting patients and was told that the profession may lead to physical injury. She and her classmates saved the information and planned to review it when they began field-work. They did not consider the impact of ergonomics on their everyday lives as students.

The students spent hours in that same lecture room and, over time, they became increasingly dissatisfied with their learning environment. She felt the hard table surface digging into her elbows. She heard complaints about the lighting, the temperature, and the chairs that filled the room like the air filled her lungs as she took a deep breath. She was burned out, both physically and mentally, but at least her classmates all seemed to be in the same boat. She thought to herself: “How do I stop feeling this burnt-out? How do I keep my passion alive?” It was then that she decided to try and make changes to the lecture hall they spent so much time in.

The other students showed excitement as they were handed their chair cushions, footrests, armrests, and wrist pads. She saw instant relief on their faces as they sat down with their new modifications. Students let out a sigh, thanked her, and appeared surprised as they melted into their new and improved learning environment. The professors told her that the students using the equipment appeared happier and more



comfortable during class. The students and professors alike did not realize that such an easy, inexpensive change could result in so much comfort. She was excited to see how these changes would impact both their physical and mental well-being over time.

Nissenbaum saw the instant impact of these modifications on my peers and advocated for permanent change to the learning environment. The distance-learning students were educated on how to evaluate and modify their work-from-home environment. In-person students were educated on ergonomic principles for educational settings and as occupational therapists. Nissenbaum advocated for the role of OT in the physical design of campus learning environments. She provided university leadership with guidelines for creating positive, inclusive, and comfortable learning spaces based on universal design principles. She advocated to make these temporary modifications permanent so that students like Nissenbaum can prevent burnout, and reduce mental and physical health risks.

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# Tracking Love, Marking Milestones: The Hidden Struggles of Caregiver Mental Health

BY KEHINDE OLASEHINDE, OT/S



Tracking developmental milestones can be a confusing and emotionally taxing experience for caregivers, particularly those with children receiving early intervention services. While milestone checklists and developmental guidelines are designed to support early identification of delays, in fact, a recent study found that over 60% of caregivers reported feeling anxious or worried when their child did not meet expected milestones on time. Caregivers struggle to interpret these benchmarks accurately or feel uncertain about what is considered “typical” development (Zubler et al., 2022). This confusion can lead to heightened anxiety, feelings of inadequacy, or fear that they are not doing enough to support their child’s growth. Studies have shown that when caregivers are unsure about developmental expectations or perceive delays in their child’s progress, they may experience increased stress, worry, and even symptoms of depression (Fenwick et al., 2020). This emotional toll is often compounded by a lack of clear guidance or accessible support tools tailored to caregiver needs. As a result, while developmental tracking is a critical component of early identification and support, it also has the potential to negatively impact caregiver mental health when not paired with appropriate resources, education, and emotional support.

Caregivers play a crucial role in supporting early childhood development, but the process of tracking milestones can often be overwhelming. With increasing awareness of early childhood development, caregivers are encouraged to track milestones, and nearly 1 in 3 caregivers experience stress or uncertainty in the process. This study, conducted at Criterion Child Enrichment, seeks to evaluate how well caregivers understand developmental progress and whether tracking these mile-

stones contributes to anxiety or mental health concerns. The research team hopes to bridge knowledge gaps by developing a comprehensive caregiver toolkit to support families navigating early intervention services.

Kehinde Olasehinde, an occupational therapy student at Western New England University, was drawn to this project because she has seen firsthand how developmental tracking can be both a valuable tool and a source of stress for caregivers. Olasehinde has always been passionate about supporting both children and their caregivers in navigating early developmental milestones. Through her experiences in community settings, Olasehinde has witnessed the challenges caregivers face when tracking their child’s progress and how it can be both an empowering tool and a source of anxiety.

The project is led by Olasehinde in collaboration with Criterion Child Enrichment and early intervention service and its network of early intervention specialists. The research team works closely with caregivers of children enrolled in early intervention programs to gather firsthand insights into their experiences.

With early childhood development being a critical period for lifelong learning and success, it is essential to provide caregivers with the knowledge, confidence, and emotional support they need. This study will not only highlight gaps in caregiver awareness but also offer practical solutions to reduce stress and improve engagement with early intervention resources.

Olasehinde created an accessible, evidence-based resource that not only helps caregivers understand and track milestones but also equips them with strategies to manage stress and prioritize self-care. By exploring how developmental tracking impacts caregiver mental health, she hopes to contribute to a broader conversation about the need for mental health support within early intervention services. Ultimately, Olasehinde believes that when caregivers feel confident and supported, both they and their children thrive.

“By understanding how caregivers feel and what they need, we can create better tools that make developmental tracking easier and less stressful.” – Tania Mendez-Gross

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# Cooking with Confidence: An inclusive cooking course empowering individuals with disabilities to become more confident in their culinary skills

BY LEO READEY, OT/S

Learning how to cook may seem like an impossible task for some, whether it is handling a knife to chop ingredients, using a grill or a stove top for the first time, or trying new meals hand prepared in your own kitchen. "Cooking with Confidence" is changing the way people with disabilities think about cooking, making it achievable for participants to become more independent and confident in the kitchen, one meal at a time.

Western New England Doctor of Occupational Therapy candidate Leo Readey has made it a mission to bring therapeutic use of cooking to the community around him. "Cooking is a form of creativity and for me personally. It improves my self-esteem when I create a meal that is enjoyed by everyone around me," Readey said as he was explaining the motive behind this project. "Everyone should have the opportunity to learn how to cook no matter what their physical or cognitive abilities are. This class was developed to teach them safe, adaptive ways to make cooking more achievable for them in their own homes."



While Readey has a passion for cooking and has some experience in the back of house operations of meal preparations, he needed expert guidance and a cooking space to achieve his goal of providing a cooking class to the community. This led him to partner with Holyoke Community College MGM Culinary Arts Institute Chef and Food Network producer, Tracy Carter. Carter and Readey collaborated to bring this opportunity to the community of people with disabilities in a safe and educational manner. Chef Marangelly Vargas-Gonzalez also supported the project by serving as one of the class instructors. Seven participants and their care partners signed up to be involved in this six-week course, and while Chefs Carter and Vargas-Gonzalez taught the basic principles of cooking to the participants, Readey provided individualized attention to the participants utilizing an occupational therapy perspective. This included instruction on adaptations such as adaptive cooking tools, new cooking techniques, ergonomic suggestions and safety considerations, all of which were focused on becoming more confident in their own cooking abilities.

Kitchen skills addressed over the course of the six-week program included cutting, measuring, handling, stirring, chopping, transferring, and even grilling certain foods. The cooking class menu included breakfast foods such as pancakes and eggs, grilled chicken caesar salads, tacos, homemade french fries and much more. As participant satisfaction was key to the success of the class, so is empowering the individuals to feel more confident in themselves. One participant stated, "Maybe people think we can't cook because we have ADHD, or autism, or dyslexia. But we can. We're showing that anyone can learn to cook." Another participant noted that being introduced to this new equipment has led her to purchase finger shields, a piece of equipment introduced by Readey that will allow her to feel safer cutting foods in her own kitchen.

"I'm truly inspired to teach [our participants] new things and set them up for success, which is one of the biggest goals in our culinary program for each student that walks through this building... their confidence and enthusiasm was great to witness," Chef Vargas-Gonzalez said of the confidence in participants growing as the culinary challenges increased week by week.

# Unlimbited Wellness<sup>©</sup>: Exploring Prosthetic Use: Navigating the Journey of Embodiment Through Occupational Therapy Intervention

BY JORDYN ROBERTSON, OT/S

Jordyn Robertson is a third-year Occupational Therapy doctoral student at Western New England University (WNE). She earned her B.S. in Health Studies from Bridgewater State University in 2022 after transferring from American International College where she focused on community health and wellness.

The focus of Robertson's capstone project centered on Unlimbited Wellness<sup>©</sup>, a telehealth-based platform designed to support people with upper limb absence (ULA). As part of the program, Robertson facilitated a 6-week virtual support focused on supporting participants in their prosthetic journey, aimed at reducing prosthetic abandonment and fostering emotional connection with prosthetic devices. Participants met weekly via telehealth to discuss key topics such as identity, confidence, daily challenges, prosthetic acceptance, and embodiment. The virtual format increased accessibility and allowed for consistent participation regardless of geographic location.

"I wanted to create a space that was about more than just the mechanics of the device," Robertson said. "It was about making room for the emotional and social experiences too."

Sessions encouraged storytelling, peer support, and reflection, highlighting occupational therapy's holistic approach to prosthetic care. One participant shared:

"Thank you for including us... There's such a lack of resources for amputees and their families. It's amazing to feel seen, heard, and appreciated. I've looked forward to this group every week."

Robertson partnered with Laura Katzenberger, CP, & Director of Clinical Services at Handspring Clinical Services. Robertson gained firsthand experience in holistic prosthetic care. She traveled with faculty mentor Dr. Debra Latour, PP-OTD, M.Ed., OTR/L, FAOTA, and author of Unlimbited Wellness<sup>©</sup> to observe prosthetic fittings, OT evaluations, and client-centered care in action. Together, they also featured long-time prosthesis users on the Handspring Heroes page through interviews and photos.

Another participant reflected:

"People online make prosthetics look like real hands—which isn't reality. I wish I knew that earlier. It would have helped me accept it and adjust better." – Group Participant

Robertson's passion lies in addressing the emotional and functional challenges of prosthesis use and promoting inclusive, accessible OT programming that empowers individuals to reconnect with their bodies and lives.



References:



# Mock Simulations at Allied Community Programs Help Individuals with Intellectual Developmental Disabilities Gain Independence

BY JOSEPH RUSSO, OT/S

Have you ever thought about all the little steps it takes to complete a simple errand? When you go grocery shopping, eat at a restaurant, or go to the bank, you follow a set of steps without even thinking about it. But for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD), these everyday tasks can be harder. Joseph Russo, an Occupational Therapy (OT) student from Western New England University, has created a program using mock simulations to help people with IDD practice and build essential life skills at Allied Community Programs in Enfield, CT. The project used role-playing activities, called mock simulations, to let participants practice real-life situations in a safe and supportive environment. This helped them build confidence and become more independent. Staff member Diane Spooner shared, "It was amazing to see how much confidence the participants gained from these simulations."

The project took place at Allied Community Programs, where sessions were held Monday through Thursday from 9:30 to 10:30 a.m. Participants worked in small groups and learned through modified materials such as visual aids, enlarged text and pictures, modeling, repetition, and breaking down complex tasks into smaller steps. These changes made learning easier for everyone, included people of all abilities, and helped them practice important daily life skills. Staff member Darlene Borowski noted, "repeating the steps and the visual aids were the most helpful to meet the needs of the individuals."

Each week focused on a different real-world activity. During the first week, participants practiced grocery shopping using picture-based grocery lists to help them find items in a mock store. At the end of the week, they visited a local grocery store, where they each purchased one item from an ice cream list and later made a sundae. In the second week, they practiced dining at a restaurant by role-playing how to greet a host, order food, and pay for their meal at a mock Olive Garden. Since some participants had difficulty reading, the menu included enlarged pictures of different meal choices. At the end of the week, they put their skills to the test by eating at a real Olive Garden for lunch. The third week focused on banking skills, where participants learned how to ask for change in different amounts. On Friday, they visited a bank, waited in line, and independently asked for change.

One of the most important parts of this project was that participants could learn without fear of failure. They practiced in a controlled setting where mistakes were seen as learning opportunities. If they struggled, they received guidance and feedback to help them improve. To measure progress, staff members completed surveys before and after the simulations and community outings. The surveys asked if participants they observed had improved their social skills, communication, and ability to manage transactions. By comparing the answers, staff members could see how much each person had learned.

The main goal of this project was to help participants feel more confident in handling real-life situations on their own. By practicing in a structured and supportive environment, they gained valuable experiences that made them more comfortable and independent in their daily lives. The program not only taught daily life skills but also helped build self-confidence and a sense of accomplishment.

Looking ahead, Allied Community Programs hopes to continue and expand this program by working with more local businesses and public services. This would create even more opportunities for individuals with IDD to practice real-world skills. The project showed how hands-on learning can make a real difference in helping people with IDD become more independent and confident in their communities.





## Mapping the Path Forward: A Dual Approach Using OT Assessment & Mentorship to Support the Well-Being of Youth in Custody of the Department of Children and Family Services

BY KIMBERLY SANTOS, OT/S

In the child welfare system, youth need stability and support to grow. Kimberly Santos, a Doctor of Occupational Therapy (OTD) student, developed a training program at the Gándara Center in Springfield, Massachusetts, to enhance direct care staff's skills in building trust, fostering a safe environment, and supporting youth who have experienced trauma. At Gándara, direct care staff received specialized training to better support youth in custody of the Department of Children and Families (DCF). The educational training program included six educational sessions focused on attachment disorders, building healthy relationships, the impact of trauma on developmental milestones, trauma-informed care, and recognizing trauma symptoms. Participants received a personal workbook to complete reflective assignments and to provide continued

educational resources. Through interactive training, hands-on learning, and guided discussions, direct care staff developed skills in emotional validation, trauma-informed care responses, and situational awareness, enabling them to recognize and respond effectively to the diverse needs of youth in residential care. Rather than relying just on behavioral management approaches, the training focuses on relationship-building, emotional safety, and advocacy for youth. Direct care staff finish the program knowing how to use trauma-informed care, support youth in a meaningful way, and create a stable, safe environment for them.

In addition to training direct care staff, Santos identified a critical gap in OT services for youth in residential settings: the lack of a structured method to assess emotional and environmental safety. This realization led to the development of the Occupational Safety Assessment in Youth-Centered Environmental Contexts (OSAYE), a formal OT assessment designed to help therapists evaluate and address the unique needs of at-risk youth. OSAYE provides occupational therapists with a structured approach to assessing emotional well-being and environmental safety. Using a Likert scale and visual tools, the assessment helps youth express their experiences in a way that ensures OT interventions align with their specific needs. Tailored for youth in DCF custody, OSAYE prioritizes their perspectives, reinforcing the importance of client-centered care.

Dr. Jennifer Anderson, an occupational therapist and Santos' site mentor at Gándara, reported the project's impact. "Kim is addressing care on multiple levels, ensuring staff are properly trained while also developing an OT assessment that could change the way we approach safety and well-being for these youth."

By implementing this training program and OSAYE assessment, Santos is working toward a future where youth in residential care receive the support and stability they deserve. Her goal is to ensure these initiatives continue beyond her Doctoral Experiential Capstone Project, creating a sustainable framework that empowers both direct care staff and occupational therapists to make a lasting difference. Youth in the child welfare system deserve more than just safety; they deserve to feel valued, supported, and empowered. Through education, assessment, and advocacy, Santos is helping to make that a reality.

## Parting Thoughts

**We hope that you enjoyed reading about our OTD student projects, and that perhaps their stories have provoked your own ideas and inspired you to partner with us on future efforts.**

Please reach out to us with your questions and ideas. We would love to hear from you!

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## Notes, Questions, and Project Ideas

