



Understanding the Differences Between School-Based OT and Medical-Based OT

Occupational therapy practitioners (OTPs), including therapists and assistants, help children do the activities they need, want, and must do—like playing, learning, or dressing. Some get OT at school, others in medical settings, and some in both. This flyer explains how school-based and medical-based OT differ, overlap, and support children's daily routines and strengths.



WHERE SERVICES HAPPEN

- **School-Based OT** happens during the regular school day. OTPs work with students in classrooms, lunchrooms, playgrounds, hallways, vocational spaces, or wherever support is needed to support learning and social activities.
- **Medical-Based OT** typically takes place in hospitals, therapy clinics, or private practices. These services help children learn new skills (habilitation) or recover lost skills (rehabilitation) that affect daily life at home or in the community. OTPs work closely with families and doctors to support the child's health and development.

WHAT EACH TYPE OF OT FOCUSES ON

- ✓ **School-Based OT** helps students take part in everyday routines—like completing written work, using school tools, managing time and materials, moving between classes, understanding emotions, or working in groups. OTPs may modify tasks, change the environment, or teach strategies to help students feel confident and included.
- ✓ **Medical-Based OT** helps children build independence at home and in the community—such as brushing teeth, using utensils, moving safely, or dressing. They also support how children understand and manage sensory input that affects attention, regulation, and comfort. Services may support ongoing development or recovery after illness or injury.

WHAT THE GOALS ARE

- ✓ **School-Based OT:** In school, the goal is to support the student's participation in learning and school life. OTPs focus on what supports each student in the classroom, connecting with peers, managing school routines, and working toward future goals like further education, work, or community life.
- ✓ **Medical-Based OT:** In medical-based OT, the goal is to help children gain or recover important life skills. Services focus on safety, coordination, strength, or attention, helping children build independence and confidence at home and in the community.

Both kinds of OT help children grow, gain confidence, and become more independent, but each focuses on different areas.



HOW OTP'S WORK WITH OTHERS

School-Based OTPs collaborate with teachers, families, and school staff to share ideas and strategies that support student learning, routines, and social participation. Ongoing communication helps the team stay updated on what's working and what might need to change. School OT supports access to learning, relationships, and school routines. What school OT looks like can vary based on a student's age and needs—from preschool through high school and beyond.

Medical-Based OTPs work with doctors, nurses, caregivers, and families to focus on health, safety, and life skills important to the child and family. They communicate with the care team as needed to adjust supports as the child's needs and routines change. Medical OT supports health, development, and life skills at home and in the community.



How Services are Decided



School-Based OT is part of public education and is free for families. The team—including parents—reviews information to decide if OT is needed for the student to participate in school. This happens through an IEP, a 504 Plan, or support under education laws like the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA).

Medical-Based OT often begins with a doctor's referral, especially when insurance is involved. Sometimes families can contact a clinic directly for an evaluation. OTPs work with families, healthcare providers, and insurance companies to determine needed services and payment.

Conclusion

While both school-based and medical-based OT aim to help children develop independence and improve their quality of life, their goals, settings, and methods differ. School-based OT focuses on helping students thrive within the school environment and achieve academic and social success, while medical-based OT works to support a child's daily living skills and recovery from medical conditions. Understanding these differences can help parents make informed decisions about the services their child may need to succeed both in and out of school.