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## Back to School Tip Sheet Overview

Returning to school is a complex event, even in a typical school year. With the COVID-19 pandemic and other social uncertainty, new challenges have been presented. Many students have experienced major disruptions to their routines. Traumatic events (e.g., separation from extended family members and friends during quarantine, loss of a loved one to COVID-19, disruption to typical activities and daily routines, etc.) related to the pandemic will influence their confidence in returning to school. By supporting the student and addressing their routines, environments, and related tasks, students may have a more positive and productive day, leading to better school outcomes.

Returning to school following the COVID-19 quarantine requires flexibility and extra attention to routines and the environment. When determining how to set up the environment for a successful return to school, consider the various persons involved (e.g., student, teacher, paraprofessional), and the array of tasks and occupations (e.g., learning, playing) performed in the environments.

The [American Occupational Therapy Association \(AOTA\)](#) produced these Back to School Tip Sheets to provide practical tips for parents, guardians, caregivers, administrators, teachers, para-professionals, and students to navigate these challenges. Occupational therapy practitioners provide a continuum of services and support to students in general and in special education under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973. Occupational therapy practitioners can help to modify various school environments; establish safe and effective classroom routines; and address the physical, cognitive, psychosocial, and sensory components of student performance. This includes addressing needs for an individual, for groups, or for the school or school system.

For more detailed information or if you have additional questions, please contact an occupational therapy practitioner in your school system.

*Note: This document also contains an overarching problem solving model that can be used to address new questions as they arise. The Back to School Tip Sheets were developed using this problem solving model. The information is intended to be used in conjunction with other direction and guidance provided by public health officials; local, state, and federal governments; and school officials, and is not intended to supplant such direction or guidance. For more information, as well as a specific example of working through the problem solving model, please see the Problem Solving Model section below.*

## About AOTA

The American Occupational Therapy Association (AOTA) is the national professional association established in 1917 to represent the interests and concerns of occupational therapy practitioners and students, and to improve the quality of occupational therapy services. The practice of occupational therapy is science-driven, evidence-based, and enables people of all ages to live life to its fullest by promoting health and addressing the functional effects of illness, injury, and disability. Occupational therapy practitioners work with people of all ages to maximize independence and function. This includes considering how person, place, and environment influence occupations. In occupational therapy, occupations are the purposeful activities in a person's day. For children, these include play, school, self-care (dressing, eating, etc.) and other activities. More information is available in the AOTA fact sheet, [Occupational Therapy's Role with School Settings](#).

# Detailed Information Regarding Tip Sheet Development

## Occupational Therapy Practice Framework

Occupational therapy practitioners, including occupational therapists (OTs) and occupational therapy assistants (OTAs), utilize the [Occupational Therapy Practice Framework \(OTPF-4\)](#) (4th ed.; OTPF-4; American Occupational Therapy Association, in press) to guide intervention and services. Understanding the complexity of daily occupations requires a multi-faceted framework that addresses function from many perspectives. OTPF-4 is the framework that outlines the various approaches that occupational therapy practitioners use to help individuals in “achieving health, well-being, and participation in life through engagement in occupation” (OTPF, p. 4). Occupational therapy practitioners work in many environments, including school systems, to address the specific needs of the person, group, or population in engaging in their daily occupations.

## Problem Solving Model

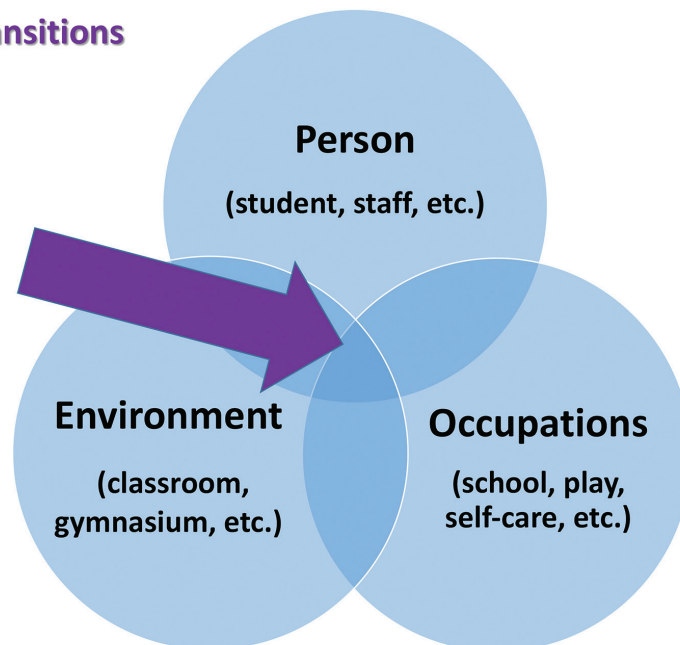
When new events arise, the problem solving model used to develop these tip sheets can be used to find new solutions. The model utilized to develop these tip sheets has been adapted from the Person, Environment, Occupation (PEO) Model (Law, et al., 1996) to guide problem solving related to return to school during a pandemic. This model emphasizes the interaction between the person, the environment, and the occupation (task at hand) to promote optimal performance. This document recognizes the student as the key individual, which is consistent with the client-centered focus of occupational therapy (see Figure 1). This model can be adapted by families, teachers, and administrators to approach problem solving from other perspectives if desired. The model can also be used to address concerns when the teacher or the school community are considered the recipient of services (person).

**Figure 1: Return to School Problem-Solving Model**

### Promote Successful Transitions

(in spite of uncertainty)

- From home to school
- During transportation
- Between assignments
- During altered routines
- Back to home



### Example: Working Through the Problem Solving Model

A typical school day and school year consist of many transitions. These can range from moving between topics in class to moving to a new grade. These transitions can be difficult for some students, and can become even more challenging during stressful times. In most cases, the requirements for managing COVID-19 precautions will increase the complexity of navigating these transitions.

For example, a change in a lunchtime routine, with younger students now required to eat and have recess in the classroom instead of in the cafeteria could be considered in the following way:

- Student (Person)
  - Cope with frustration and disappointment related to remaining in the same space all day.
  - Grieve loss of time for engaging with peers during unstructured time (e.g., recess).
  - Regulate emotions and behavior associated with excitement and noise-level changes.
  - Manage personal challenges associated with special needs.
- Classroom (Environment)
  - Position desks to facilitate safe social interaction and management of food items during lunch.
  - Provide multiple garbage cans to reduce close interaction among students when disposing of trash.
  - Ensure availability of a sink for hand washing vs. relying only on hand sanitizer.
- Tasks (Occupation)
  - Establish a process for school lunches to be delivered to the classroom.
  - Establish a process for cleaning hands prior to lunch while adhering to social distancing/infection control precautions.
  - Establish a process for providing assistance needed for opening lunch items while adhering to social distancing/infection control precautions.
    - Using gloves, wipe down touched surfaces.
  - Establish a post-lunch clean up and trash management plan.
  - Establish a repertoire of recess games that can be played in the classroom while adhering to social-distancing/infection control precautions.

As seen in this example, the seemingly simple transition to eating lunch in the classroom instead of the cafeteria raises important questions about how school teams may create environments that maximize engagement and participation, while adhering to social distancing/infection control procedures. By proactively addressing aspects of the activity specific to the student, the classroom, and the different lunchtime tasks, the students' experience of the school day can be positively affected.

## References

- American Occupational Therapy Association. (In press). Occupational therapy practice framework: Domain and process (4th ed.). *American Journal of Occupational Therapy*, 74(Suppl. 2). Advance online publication. [https://www.aota.org/~media/corporate/files/secure/practice/officialdocs/guidelines/otpf4\\_final\\_for\\_web.pdf](https://www.aota.org/~media/corporate/files/secure/practice/officialdocs/guidelines/otpf4_final_for_web.pdf)
- Law, M., Cooper, B., Strong, S., Stewart, D., Rigby, P., & Letts, L. (1996). The Person–Environment–Occupation Model: A transactive approach to occupational performance. *Canadian Journal of Occupational Therapy*, 63, 9–23. <https://doi.org/10.1177/000841749606300103>