

Ask OTIS: OT Evaluation and Eligibility under IDEA

Q: I recently evaluated a 7 year old student who scored 1.5 standard deviations below the mean on the new Bruininks Test (BOT-2). The school psychologist I work with says that I can't qualify the student for OT if he scores less than 2.0 standard deviations below the mean but he is having difficulty in class and on the playground and I think he would benefit from OT services. Could you clarify how to determine whether the child is appropriate for OT services?

Many therapists (as well as other professionals in the schools) struggle with determining when to provide services under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). There are no "required deficits" for OT services in the IDEA or the Washington Administrative Code (WAC) but there are specific requirements for determining whether a child is eligible for special education services. Once the child is determined eligible for special education, then that child has access to OT services if they are REQUIRED for the child to receive a "free appropriate public education" (FAPE) in the "least restrictive environment" (LRE).

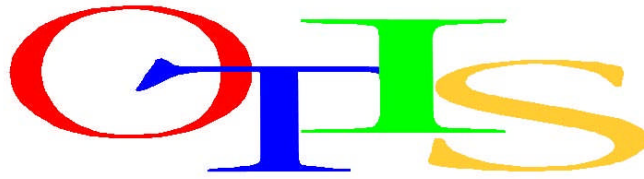
The confusion regarding when and how to use norm-referenced test scores to determine the need for school-based OT services results from the fact that there are multiple reasons for occupational therapy evaluation in the public schools. The two most common reasons for evaluation are (1) to assist the team in determining whether a child is eligible for special education services and (2) to determine whether a child is in need of occupational therapy services. Test scores are used differently depending on the reason for the evaluation.

1. Assisting the team in determining eligibility for special education services:

According to the IDEA and the WACs, eligibility is determined by applying the following 3-prong test:

- (1) Does the student have a disability?
- (2) Is the disability impacting his/her educational program?
- (3) Does the student need specially designed instruction?

You must answer "yes" to all three of these questions for a student to be eligible for special education. An occupational therapy evaluation can assist the evaluation team in answering these questions. If the team is considering the Developmental Delay (DD) category, the scores from the BOT-2 or another standardized, norm-referenced motor assessment could be important in helping to determine whether the student has a disability. Eligibility under the DD category requires that the child is two standard deviations below the mean in at least one area of development if the child is between the ages of 3 and 9. Children between the ages of 3 and 6 can also be eligible under the DD category if they receive a standard deviation score of -1.5 in at least two areas of development. An occupational profile, observations of performance in the



natural environment, file review, teacher interview and analysis of occupational performance can assist the team in determining whether the student's disability is impacting his or her educational program and whether specially designed instruction is needed.

2. Determining the need for occupational therapy services:

Once the evaluation team determines eligibility, then it is up to the IEP team to determine who will provide the services. There are no "qualification" numbers for OT in the IDEA or WAC. In fact, the law emphasizes the importance of participation and access to the general education curriculum as a basis for the recommendation of OT services. So, while the BOT-2 could help determine why a student is having difficulty in his/her school environment, a certain standard deviation score should not guarantee OT services nor should a certain standard deviation score prevent a student from receiving services. In order to recommend OT, you need to use more than one tool or strategy (method or measure), so professional observation is not enough. You don't have to use standardized testing, but you could use another strategy such as file review, teacher interview, etc. The bottom line is that you are able to answer why the OT services would be necessary to support that child's participation in their educational curriculum rather than just being beneficial for the child. You could use a version of the 3-pronged test to help answer that question.

This article was written by Dottie Handley-More, Yvonne Swinth, and Sara Woodward, OTIS Co-Chairs. It originally appeared in the WOTA Newsletter in 2006 (Volume 64, Number 5 p. 7).

OTIS (Occupational Therapists In Schools) is a standing committee for the Washington Occupational Therapy Association (WOTA) that was set up to help support therapists in school-based practice.