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"Getting into the spirit": Exploring dimensions of spirituality in the everyday occupations of young children

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Introduction

In recent years, the relationship between spirituality and occupation has attracted increased attention from researchers and practitioners. Spirituality is considered to be an important aspect of occupation and also of enabling health and well-being. However, to date there have been few studies that explore the complex relationship between spirituality and occupation, especially as experienced by healthy children.

Objectives

This paper will describe a study that explored the relationship between spirituality and occupation in six pre-school aged children in a rural Australian community.

Methods

Phenomenology was used a framework for this study. Child participants were asked to complete an art activity and then the researcher discussed the artwork with each child. The discussions were audio-tape recorded and transcribed. The researcher's observations and reflections were also used as data. The data were analysed thematically to develop understandings of the phenomenon of spirituality and occupation in young children.

Results

Feeling "special" was found to be a form of spiritual self-identity that was expressed through occupation. Spirituality was experienced through doing activities outdoors, with a pet, or with family and friends. The children also felt special doing activities they were good at. It is theorised that in children, spirituality can be a part of normal, everyday occupations and that the spiritual dimension of occupation can be increased or decreased according to how the child feels about the occupation and who he/she performs the occupation with.

Conclusion

While there are still gaps in understanding the relationship between spirituality and occupation and the effect this phenomenon might have on children's healthy development, it does appear to be a facet of normal child development.

Contribution to OT/ Evidence base of OT

This study investigated an area of research and practice that may be neglected in occupational therapy and it was discovered that spirituality in occupation is relevant to healthy children's lives. It is hoped that this paper will enable occupational therapists to be more cognisant of spiritual dimensions of everyday occupation and thus better enable children to access and develop spirituality through facilitating engagement in "special" occupations.