

THE SCHOOLYARD PARTICIPATION GROUP - Enhancing children's social inclusion through play

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Introduction

The links between social exclusion and mental illness are well acknowledged (Whiteford, Cullen and Baingana, in press). For children and adolescents, poor social skill development, particularly low acceptance and aggressiveness are major determinants of current and later mental health and maladjustment problems (Parker & Asher, 1987). Play is an important occupation for children, however exploration regarding its enactment in the schoolyard is limited within the occupational therapy literature. Effective interventions are needed to support children with schoolyard social difficulties, and promote social inclusion at this early stage of life.

Objectives

The results of a randomized controlled trial are reported examining the efficacy of an intervention designed to enhance children's participation in social occupations (play) in the schoolyard.

Methods

A Randomised Controlled Trial [n=40] utilizing a mixed method design, examined socially based play skills among mainstream primary school children identified by their class teachers as having schoolyard participation problems. The intervention was conducted with two groups of 10 children with two matched control groups in the children's schoolyard with pre- post- and follow up data collection points. The intervention was provided by the principal researcher an occupational therapist and a co-therapist, a Department of School Education Guidance Officer.

Results

The results of a pilot project revealed significant improvements in children's playground participation as measured using the School Function Assessment [Coster, Deeney, Haltiwanger & Haley, 1998]. Results from the RCT currently in progress will be discussed.

Conclusion & Contribution to the practice/evidence base of occupational therapy.

The schoolyard as a venue for facilitating primary school aged children's play skills, is an obvious and currently underutilized context by occupational therapists, and could have potentially positive outcomes for students, their peers, teachers, parents and the school community with the outcomes of this study guiding future interventions. At a population health level, the costs of mental ill health in later life may be positively impacted upon through the implementation of appropriate occupation based social inclusion strategies such as this.