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Functional analysis of challenging behaviours in children and adolescents; advances in occupational therapy education.

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Introduction: Effective support and treatment of children and adolescents who exhibit challenging behaviours (CB) in their daily lives depends on the understanding of the "function" that such behaviours serve for the individual. Hence, treatment of CB appears to be more than essential. Functional analysis (FA) is the scientific method that focuses on the identification of variables that influence the occurrence of such behaviours and has become a hallmark of contemporary treatment approaches across disciplines. Within an MSc course in occupational therapy (OT), a module on FA of CB for children and adolescents has been designed to teach those skills.

Objectives: This presentation concentrates on the main aspects of this MSc module establishing its necessity within an OT curriculum by exploring its specific aims which, among others, include: a) consideration of issues of common disorders in childhood and adolescence wherein CB may obscure the implementation of specific rehabilitation programmes; b) development of a critical understanding of the key components referring to FA and ways of their application towards evidence-based clinical practice; c) development of professional skills in conducting individualised, functionally-based assessments of CB in a constructive and non-aversive way; and d) provision of opportunities for critically analysing, reviewing and appraising current practices within rehabilitation settings for children and adolescents exhibiting CB.

Description: This MSc module involves notional learning time of 200 hours covering areas such as child development and learning processes; understanding the scientific approach to conducting systematic direct observations; essential components and methodological issues for conducting FA based on the causes of CB; practicals using especially designed multimedia software capturing all aspects applicable to FA; or management of OT interventions following the results of FA.

Discussion/Conclusion: Teaching of FA methods has the potential to make a significant difference to how OT students and practitioners monitor and manage CB which usually negotiates the effectiveness of OT interventions.

Contribution to the practice/evidence base of occupational therapy: FA can provide important information to promote clinical data-based decision-making. Thus, OT interventions can be developed which are likely to be more effective and build the future in professional development adopting evidence-based practices.