

Brick by Brick: Understanding the impact of poverty on engagement in childhood occupations

Theresa M. Carlson

Washington University in Saint Louis, Saint Louis, MO, United States

A systematic review of interdisciplinary research on the impact of poverty on engagement in childhood occupations was performed. Based on this evidence the Brick by Brick model was designed. The purpose of this model is to assist occupational therapists to recognize the important influence that socioeconomic status has upon engagement in childhood occupations and enable them to provide the most effective interventions for children who experience poverty.

Occupational therapy assessment and intervention processes with children who experience poverty need to incorporate an understanding of the complex interaction between socioeconomic status, occupational performance, and child development. The Brick by Brick model aims to facilitate this understanding. The model is based upon the following ideas: 1. Child development is conceptualized as a linear path upon which children must progress in order to successfully achieve developmental milestones, 2. Occupational performance is the primary mechanism by which child development occurs, 3. Children may encounter a number of barriers to achieving occupational performance and developmental milestones as they progress through child development.

Interdisciplinary research clearly identifies that the experience of poverty can have a profoundly negative impact on childhood development through a myriad of intrinsic and extrinsic factors. Many occupational therapists currently work with children without consideration of the child's environmental contexts outside of the immediate working environment. While interventions aimed at remediating or compensating for deficits in intrinsic factors may be helpful to the child, these interventions are at risk of being unsuccessful unless professionals acknowledge the influence of extrinsic factors in the child's life. Interventions with these children will be more successful if occupational therapists address intrinsic as well as extrinsic factors.

This model elucidates that professionals who work with children who experience poverty have a professional responsibility to not only provide effective intrinsic factor interventions to remediate deficits, but also to address factors contained in the child's environmental microsystem, exosystem, mesosystem, and macrosystem. Occupational therapists are well poised to meet this responsibility, and doing so will enhance the profession's ability to benefit clients and become a recognized leader in the elimination of health and educational disparities and promotion of child health.