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California Early Childhood
Special Education Network


**Funded by the California Department of Education (CDE),
Special Education Division**

# Effective Occupational Therapy Assessments in Early Childhood

**August 27, 2025**

# About the California Early Childhood Special Education (CalECSE) Network

*Funded by the CDE*

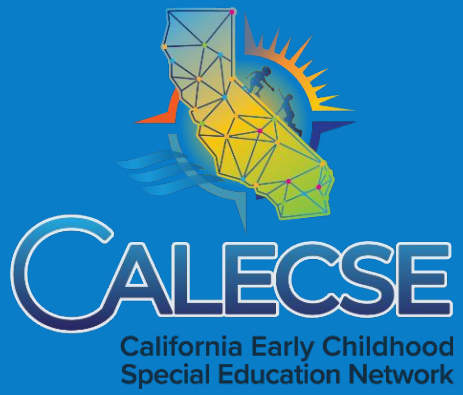
https://www.calecse.org

CalECSE is a technical assistance project funded under the CCDE that supports Local Educational Agencies (LEAs), Special Education Local Plan Areas (SELPAs), County Offices of Educations (COEs), and other Agency Partners in the areas of Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) Part C to B Transitions, Preschool Assessment Practices, and Preschool Child Find by providing technical assistance, professional learning, and demonstration of tangible practices that have been proven successful.

CalECSE leverages collaboration amongst agencies, disseminates resources, highlights existing exemplar practices, and provides direct technical assistance to improve the capacity, knowledge, collaboration, and implementation of evidence-based practices across agencies throughout California.

The CalECSE Network is committed to improving outcomes for children and their families by eliminating and addressing barriers to successful transition for California's youngest children with disabilities.

# The CalECSE Network Leadership Team





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# Today's Presenter

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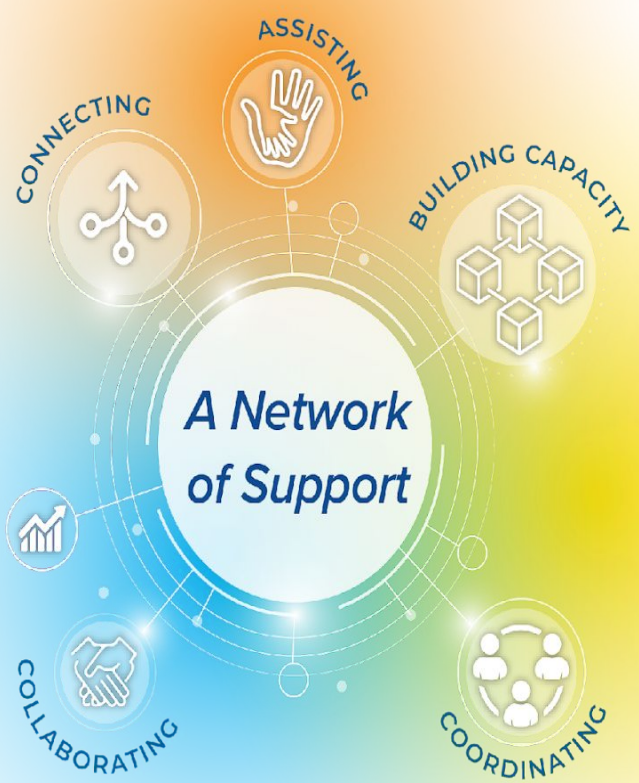


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# Poll: Who is in the Zoom Room?

# Learning Objectives

- Review Essential Components of an early childhood Occupational Therapy (OT) assessment
- Consider common referral reasons for an OT assessment
- Consider differences between early intervention, outpatient and preschool/school-based occupational therapy assessments
- Learn and review early childhood assessment tools
- Discuss Occupational Therapist's (OT) role in collaboratively building an educationally based developmental profile and assessment report

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# What is Occupation in Early Childhood?

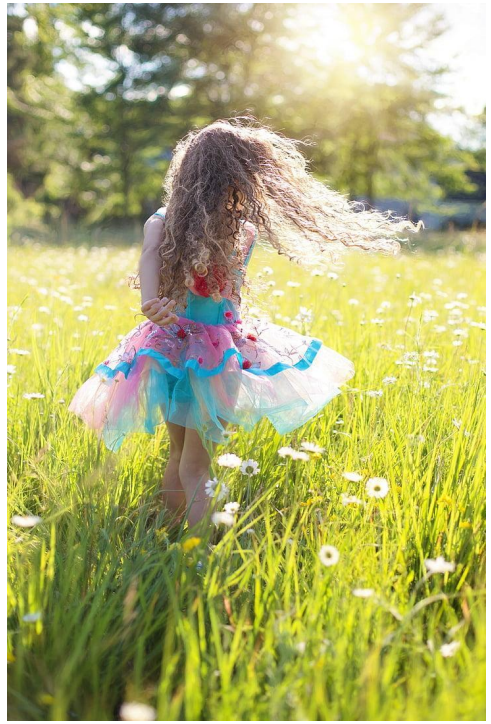
Occupational performance in early childhood includes:

- **Play**
  - Consider developmental progression of play including
    - Unoccupied Play (birth to three months)
    - Solitary play (zero to two years)
    - Spectator or onlooker play (two years)
    - Parallel play (two plus years)
    - Associative play (three to four years)
    - Cooperative play (four plus years)


Information from this image can be found at: https://pathways.org/kids-learn-play-6-stages-play-development

# Occupation in Early Childhood, continued

- **Social Participation and Regulation**
  - Sensory motor co-regulation
  - Language-based regulation
  - Metacognitive regulation
- **Motor Skills**
  - Fine-motor skills
  - Gross-motor skills
- **Sensory Processing**
  - Vestibular
  - Proprioceptive
  - Body Awareness
  - Oral or Gustatory
  - Auditory and Visual
- **Pre-Academic Skills**



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# The Benefits of Early Intervention

- The American Academy of Pediatrics reports one in six children has a developmental delay or disability.
- Providing evidence-based specialist support may significantly improve a child's developmental trajectory and enhance long term outcomes.
- Early Intervention research supports improved outcomes in:
  - cognition
  - language
  - motor development
  - social-emotional skills
  - school readiness
  - family relationships contributing to a child's mental health and overall success in adulthood
  - reduced need for more intensive special education
  - reduced need for adult disability services later in life

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# The Benefits of Early Intervention, continued

- One national study of children who participated in Early Intervention found that roughly one third of infants and toddlers who received services no longer met eligibility for having a disability at entry into kindergarten, having made significant gains.

- Information from the image on the right can be found at Center for Disease Control (CDC) Developmental Milestones Checklists: https://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/actearly/pdf/FULL-LIST-CDC_LTSAE-Checklists2021_Eng_FNL2_508.pdf


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# Essential Components of an Early Childhood OT Assessment

- Records Review
- Caregiver Interview
- Informal Assessments and Observations
- Formal Assessments
- Consideration of Environmental and Personal Factors

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# Essential Components: Records Review and Caregiver Interview

- Record review:
  - Includes previous testing and services, either OT services, county, outpatient, or other early intervention services
    - Review previous testing and growth from updated testing
    - Consider previous goal areas for developmental needs and areas the family may have concerns
- Caregiver interview:
  - Interview with caregiver to understand areas of concern, medical history, family history, goals, and strengths

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# Essential Components: Assessments and Other Factors

- Informal assessments, including non-standardized measures and observations
- Formal assessments, including standardized measures
  - Selecting assessments based on a child's previous testing and the caregiver or team concerns
- Consideration of environmental and personal factors
  - Evaluating a child's interaction within the school campus and built environment, as well as age, health conditions, interests, coping style, background and experiences

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# Further Considerations and Key Principles for Early Childhood School-Based OT Assessments

**Best Practices:**

- Conduct assessments in natural environments (classrooms, playgrounds)
- Use multi-method and multi-informant approaches
- Align with educational relevance and the child's ability to participate in routines

**Evidence-Based Approaches:**

- Ecological assessment frameworks (e.g., Top-Down Approach)
- Participation-focused evaluations (e.g., Person, Environment, Occupation [PEO] Model)
- Evaluate and encourage participation in daily routines
- Develop and enhance school and academic readiness skills
- Support motor, social-emotional, and self-care development
- Address environmental and sensory needs

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# Common Referrals for Early Childhood OT Assessments

- Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) Part C to Part B assessment
- Caregiver Referral
  - Physician or other outpatient medically based provider
- Teacher Referral

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# Common Referral for Early Childhood Assessments, Part C to Part B

- Timeline is unique:
  - Must be completed prior to a child's third birthday
- Obtain parental consent for exchange of information
- Review the Individual Family Service Plan (IFSP) and other relevant information
- Identify needed assessments to determine eligibility
- Early intervention is critical for developmental success and OT is an essential part of the early childhood team
  - Under IDEA 2004, early intervention services are designed to meet the developmental needs of an infant or toddler with a disability meeting eligibility requirements in the area of physical development, cognitive development, communication development, social or emotional development or adaptive development
  - Transition from Part C to Part B:
    - does not guarantee services in the academic setting

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# Common Referral for Early Childhood Assessments, Caregiver Request

- Often due to a concern with self-regulation, self-care, or attention at home
- Observation in the academic environment is important, but not always possible
  - Documenting a suspected delay's impact on educational access before being enrolled in an educational environment
  - Observe in different settings including other service provider sessions when possible
- Caregiver coaching and education is essential
- Consider response to intervention model or available resources within the least restrictive environment and free and appropriate public education
- Follow district policy on completing an assessment

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# Common Referral for Early Childhood Assessments, Participating in Outpatient OT

- There are some key differences between early intervention, outpatient, and preschool/school-based occupational therapy assessments.
- If a child is participating in outpatient OT, it does not necessarily mean they need school-based occupational therapy.
  - OT assessments in public schools address both the individual child's abilities and participation in the educational environment. Another purpose of the OT assessment may be to determine equipment needs for a child in the educational setting.
  - Goals and services may have an academic focus, but may also focus on self-care, routine building, and regulation if it is impacting access in the educational setting.
  - In the academic setting, self-care, routines, regulation, and learning materials can be and often are embedded into curriculum.
  - Consider a child's access to the academic curriculum and environment as well as data from developmentally based assessments.

# The OT's Role in Collaboratively Building the Educationally Based Developmental Profile


- Use a team-based approach: integrate OT findings with other disciplines.
- Choose assessments based on the referral concern and natural context relevance.
- Always ask: How does this impact the child's ability to participate and learn?
- Frame recommendations in educationally relevant language for Individualized Education Program (IEP) teams.

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# The OT's Role in Collaboratively Building the Educationally Based Developmental Profile, continued

- Evidence-based approaches
- Top-Down Model: focus on participation and function first
- Ecological Assessment: assess in natural settings
- Collaborative Consultation: partner with teachers and families
- When possible, consider Response to Intervention (RTI): tiered supports before formal referral as well as progress toward outcomes and growth during any early intervention services
- Support understanding of developmental progression of skills

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# Commonly Used Assessment Tools

Standardized tools provide valuable data but must be supplemented with naturalistic observation and teacher and parent input to fully capture the child's functional performance.

- Battelle Developmental Inventory, Third Edition
- Developmental Assessment of Young Children, Second Edition
- Hawaii Early Learning Profile
- Miller Function and Participation Scales
- Peabody Developmental Motor Scales, Third Edition (PDMS-3)
- Pediatric Evaluation of Disability Inventory, Computer Adaptive Test
- Sensory Processing Measure, SPM-P
- Sensory Profile Child, School Companion, or Toddler Forms
- School Function Assessment

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# Battelle Developmental Inventory, Third Edition (BDI-3)

**Purpose:**

- Comprehensive developmental assessment for school readiness
- Measures five developmental domains including motor, adaptive, cognitive, communication, and social-emotional

**Age Range:**

- Birth to Seven years, 11 months

**Time to Complete:**

- 60–90 minutes

**Strengths:**

- Allows assessment across multiple domains in familiar settings
- Strong alignment with IDEA Part B early childhood special education eligibility

**Best Practice:**

- Use BDI-3 for **team-based assessment** with other service providers (Speech Pathologist, Early Childhood Special Education teacher).

# Developmental Assessment of Young Children, Second Edition

**Purpose:**

- Evaluates and provides normative data using observation, caregiver interview, and direct assessment
- Five domain areas including Cognitive, Adaptive Behavior, Communication, Social Emotional and Physical

**Age Range:**

- Birth through Five years 11 months

**Time to Complete:**

- 10–20 minutes per subtest or domain

**Strengths:**

- Flexible administration in natural settings (classroom play).
- Measures functional skills within routine activities

**Best Practices:**.

- Focus on skills relevant to classroom tasks: pre-writing, self-help skills

# Hawaii Early Learning Profile

**Purpose:**

- Used for identifying needs, tracking growth and development and determining ‘next steps’ (target objectives)
- Normative scores not available
- Offers developmental charts in seven areas: Regulatory/Sensory Organization, Cognitive, Language, Gross Motor, Fine Motor, Social and Self-Help

**Age Range:**

- Two forms available: Birth through three years or three to six years

**Time to Complete:**

- Ongoing observation that is periodically summarized

**Strengths:**

- Flexible administration and may be given many times
- Provides data on typical development of skill acquisition ranges

**Best Practices:**

- Parent participation in natural environments

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# Miller Function and Participation Scales (M-FUN)

**Purpose:**

- Standardized assessment tool to evaluate a child's functional motor skills and their impact on participation in daily activities including school, providing a holistic view of a child's skills. Includes hands on activities to assess visual-motor integration, fine motor,  handwriting, and gross motor skills.

**Age Range:**

- Two years six months to seven years eleven months

**Time to Complete:**

- 20–30 minutes for each subtest, 45–50 for entire assessment

**Strengths:**

- Hands-on components are highly engaging to children and assess how skills translate into real-world applications and participation. A participation component asks parents or teachers how motor skill performance might impact participation.

**Best Practices:**

- Utilize with a child that can attend to all subtests for best domain calculation, and requires some advanced preparation for subtests

# Peabody Developmental Motor Scales, Third Edition

**Purpose:**

- Early childhood motor development program that provides both in-depth assessment and remediation of gross and fine motor skills
- Measures interrelated motor abilities that develop early in life
- Directly assesses movement patterns needed for school routines: posture, grasp, and coordination

**Age Range:**

- Zero to five years 11 months

**Time to Complete:**

- 60–90 minutes

**Strengths:**

- Updated normative data, provides age equivalents, percentile ranks, subtests scaled scores for fine and gross motor, and composite index scores for total motor index
- Interactive structured activities

**Best Practices:**

- Learn the progression of activities and incorporate play themes

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# Pediatric Evaluation of Disability Inventory Computer Adaptive Test

**Purpose:**

- Computer adaptive caregiver report measuring daily activities, mobility, social cognitive and responsibility
- Designed for use with children and youth with a variety of physical and or behavioral concerns

**Age Range:**

- Zero to 20 years 11 months

**Time to Complete:**

- 10–20 minutes

**Strengths:**

- Provides normative data and scaled scores
- Available in nine languages

**Best Practices**

- Requires access to a computer or done simultaneously with caregiver

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# Sensory Processing Measure Preschool Form (SPM-P)

**Purpose:**

- Standardized assessment tool used to evaluate sensory processing, social participation, and praxis
- Community or home form and school or classroom form are available

**Age Range:**

- Two to Five years

**Time to Complete:**

- 15–20 minutes

**Strengths:**

- Used to distinguish between typically developing children and children with sensory processing, social participation, or praxis differences

**Best Practices:**

- Observe the child over the course of many opportunities to develop responses to the seventy-five item questionnaire, can be completed by parent and teacher when appropriate

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# Sensory Profile:
# Child, School Companion or Toddler Forms

**Purpose:**

- Caregiver or teacher questionnaire evaluates a child's sensory processing patterns at home, school, and community-based activities
- Identifies and documents how sensory processing may be contributing to or interfering with a child's participation in various contexts

**Age Range:**

- Infant form (birth to six months), Toddler form (seven to 35 months), Child form (36 months to 14 years 11 months)
- Home or caregiver and School companion forms

**Time to Complete:**

- Five to 20 minutes

**Strengths:**

- Q-Global report supports a thorough understanding and interpretation of scores
- Helps shape individualized supports for regulation and attention

**Best Practices:**

- Support understanding of "Not Applicable" and understanding of sensory responses based on "typical development"

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# School Function Assessment

**Purpose:**

- Designed to assess the functional performance of students in a school setting
- Evaluates a student's participation in school activities, their need for support, and their performance of functional tasks on three scales: Participation, Task Supports, and Activity Performance

**Age Range:**

- Five years through sixth grade

**Time to Complete:**

- Five to 10 minutes per section

**Strengths:**

- Criterion referenced ratings
- Can be administered through teacher interviews, observations, and by reviewing student work

**Best Practices:**

- Student observation is an important component of the assessment in conjunction with teacher interview

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# Assessment Best Practices

- Be **culturally responsive**.
- Emphasize **function over impairment**.
- Document **strengths and needs** within context.
- Focus on **participation-based goals**.
- Prioritize **interprofessional collaboration**.

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# Elements of the Assessment Report

- Reason for Referral
  - Why was the child referred for an OT assessment, what is the purpose of the assessment and concerns of the IEP team including the parents and educational staff
- Background
  - Educational and therapeutic history, relevant health and developmental history, current program and services or supports
- Evaluation procedures:
  - Includes methods and dates, and review of existing evaluation data
- Validity of findings
  - Testing procedures must be free of bias and completed in such a manner that the child's behavior during testing is an accurate reflection of performance, and completed by a trained and knowledgeable personnel in a valid and reliable manner in accordance with instructions provided by the publisher of the assessment
- Findings
  - Includes interpretation of the educational relevance of findings, explanation of any discrepancies between test scores, and need for specialized services, materials, and equipment

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# Case Study

Four-year-old in preschool struggling with transitions

**Approach**:

- Observe transitions across the day
- Interview teacher about routines and supports
- Engage the child in play to assess sensory regulation
- Use the SPM-P and teacher checklist
- Collaborate on visual schedule and transition routine

# Final Thoughts and Questions

- Effective early childhood OT assessment blends structured tools with authentic observation
- Focus on participation, context, and collaboration
- Let's create environments where young children thrive through **occupational performance supports**
- Use **natural environments** and **contextual tools**
- Consider **developmental and social-emotional** factors
- Implement **collaborative and top-down approaches**
- Focus on **function, participation, and inclusion**
- What challenges or successes have you experienced with early childhood OT assessments in schools?

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# Share Your Feedback for a Chance to Win CalECSE 2026 Symposium Registration

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Please help us improve our practice and complete the zoom survey following this session.

After doing so, you will be entered into a raffle to win a free registration to CalECSE's 4th Annual Symposium to be held in Northern California October 20–21, 2026. Valued at over $500.

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Find our full line-up of no-cost trainings at:
https://www.calecse.org/news-resources/intentional-practices-meaningful-impact

# Interested in joining a local Community of Practice (CoP) for practitioners who support children ages zero to five ?

Find our full schedule of regional CoPs at: https://www.calecse.org/news-resources/communities-of-practice

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Communities of Practice

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# References


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