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Occupational Therapy's Role in Spirituality: Partnering with a Special Needs Ministry

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Occupational Therapy’s Role in Spirituality: Partnering with a Special Needs Ministry

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Background

Children with special needs frequently face obstacles and barriers to inclusive participation in various activities among their peers (Mathur & Koradia, 2018). One activity in particular is participation in spiritual activities within a church setting (Jacober, 2007; Lee, 2010). While several highly successful special needs ministries have been established globally, many churches currently either lack appropriate evidence-based volunteer and staff training, adequate resources and accommodations to meet each child’s needs and functional capabilities (Avis, 2019). OTs are able to utilize their perspective to identify barriers to successful participation and conceptualize plans for adjustment (Evans, 2019; Opp, 2019; Rosenburg et. al, 2015).

Problem Statement

Children with special needs frequently face obstacles to successful participation in spiritual based activities secondary to either the complete absence of supportive services within churches or limited resources for successful inclusion into established children’s and/or special needs ministries (Avis, 2019).

Purpose

The purpose of this project is to partner with Seacoast Church in Charleston and revise, enhance and support their pre-existing special needs ministry.

• Conduct a SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats) assessment of the ministry delivery and management through staff, parent and volunteer interviews and observation.
• Conduct research to create volunteer training and education pamphlets.
• Create and provide evidence-based volunteer training booklets and videos to be utilized for continued implementation post program implementation.
• Conduct and participate in bi-monthly volunteer training, utilizing training booklets, and assist with carryover weeks 8-10.
• Revise classroom curriculum to increase accessibility, inclusion and effectiveness.
• Establish and launch youth special needs “small group” weekly evening Bible study to promote community development and social participation.
• Evaluate the effectiveness of program revision and enhancement through volunteer and staff interviews, written surveys completed by parents, and observation.

Methods

The goal for this project was to increase inclusion, accessibility, child satisfaction and participation in ministry while providing adequate training for the ministry to continue growth and success once the project has been completed.

Volunteer Training & Education:
• Collaboration of volunteer training video for Night to Shine event
• Collaboration with OTD classmate for creation of volunteer training video for weekend services
• Creation of educational handouts for weekend service volunteers
• Creation of educational booklet for church leaders

Curriculum & Classroom Modifications:
• Weekly review of weekend curriculum
• Modified delivery of lesson content as needed
• Implementation of sensory related items into classroom
• Implementation of interactive activities supporting weekend lesson

Social Participation & Community Development:
• Removal of electronic barriers within classroom to promote social participation
• Collaboration with church staff regarding development of youth social groups, student inclusion in other ministries, and advocacy for greater promotion of ministry.

Results

• Informal interviews were conducted of volunteers, church staff and ministry leaders regarding the creation of training resources.
• Church staff supported the need for such materials in this setting and expressed gratitude for access to resources.
• The volunteer training video for the Night to Shine event was well received as demonstrated by volunteer competence and guest enjoyment during Night to Shine event.
• There were also weekly observations of curriculum implementation, child participation, and engagement of the volunteers.
• Noted increased social participation among children and volunteers after removal of electronic tablets in the classroom.
• Noted increased application of weekend lesson following interactive activity
• Noted stronger bonds between the children as well as between the children and the volunteers

Additionally, this project contributed to the field of research, raised awareness of a community in need, and further supported OT’s role in spirituality and church settings.

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