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Occupational Therapy Approach in a Children's Ministry Outreach Program

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Introduction

- The 16-week capstone project took place in the children's ministry department of the Dream Center of Lakeland, a community center based in Lakeland, Florida. Its mission is "to bring hope to our neighbors in need through service, resources, and education".
- The children served by the Dream Center come from low socioeconomic status (SES) neighborhoods in the Lakeland area and range in age from kindergarten through fifth grade.
- Many of the children served by the children's ministry struggle with self-regulation and express challenging behaviors such as hurting others, disrespecting adult volunteers, and verbal outbursts. This can cause difficulty for volunteers who may have little experience with children and are unaware of why these behaviors occur.

Site Description

- The **Dream Center** is a faith-based organization that provides resources and services to the local community such as a food and clothes pantries, women's health clinic, meal programs, accessible computer lab, and mentorship groups.
- The capstone project focused on the youth served by the Dream Center's children's outreach programs, **KIDS CLUB**, serving approximately 150 children per week during the school year, and **Circle J summer camp**, serving approximately 250 children for 1 week in June.
- These programs offers children a weekly opportunity to gather with peers, interact with adult volunteers, play games, eat a substantial snack, and listen to a ministry message.
- There is also an **Extreme Team** group designed for middle schoolers and high schoolers who age out of the children's programs.



Summary of Needs Assessment

- The youth served by the Dream Center come from low SES backgrounds, a population potentially at risk for poor health outcomes based on factors related to their SES (Zhang & Mersky, 2020; Yoshikawa et al., 2012; Ziviani et al., 2008; Slopen et al., 2016).
- Research has shown that youth who experience poverty, adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), and/or discrimination can be considered at risk for physical, mental, or social-emotional health-related issues in childhood and later in adulthood (Felitti et al., 1998; Houtepen et al., 2020; Tobler et al., 2013).
- The literature provided support for a community-wide implementation of sensory-based strategies, as well as examples of occupation-based and activity-based interventions that are effective at promoting positive mental health and wellness outcomes for children (Mac Cobb et al., 2014; Wilburn et al., 2022; Cahill et al., 2020; Arbesman et al., 2013).

Literature Review Summary

Needs of the Population

- Like the population served by the Dream Center, Slopen et al. (2016) showed that children who were black, Hispanic, or had a lower SES were more likely to experience ACEs compared to children who were white or had a higher SES.
- Zhang and Mersky (2020) found that 87% of children surveyed from low-income backgrounds experienced at least one ACE and there was a bidirectional relationship between the experience of ACEs and future childhood behavior issues.
- Childhood poverty has shown to cause negative mental, emotional, and behavioral health outcomes for children living in these conditions (Yoshikawa et al., 2012).

Intervention Strategies

- Occupational therapists have a role to play in implementing community-based interventions to increase the resilience of children who have been exposed disproportionately to ACEs through developmentally appropriate occupations, such as play, to foster positive long-term outcomes (Wilburn et al., 2022).
- Occupation- and activity-based interventions have proven to have a positive impact on children and adolescent's mental health and well-being (Cahill et al., 2020).
- The Alert Program® provides children with a way to recognize one's own level of alertness and teaches strategies to accomplish self-regulation autonomously (Williams et al., 2020). Mac Cobb et al. (2014) documented a successful school-wide implementation of the Alert Program in a disadvantaged population (Mac Cobb, 2014).



Victory Church. (2022). [Photograph Circle J Camp Day 2].



Victory Church. (2022). [Photograph Circle J Camp Day 4].



Victory Church. (2022). [Photograph Circle J Camp Day 3].

Capstone Project Description

Phase 1: Foundation

- Shadowed capstone mentor and learned about daily responsibilities as the leader of the children's ministry outreach program.
- Assisted with the KIDS CLUB program as well as suggested sensory-based strategies to improve children's level of alertness for optimal participation in the program.
- Participated in an online Alert Program® training course to be used as foundational framework for program implementation.

Phase 2: Circle J Program

- Provided educational presentation to summer camp volunteers on sensory-based strategies and trauma-informed care (TIC) behavioral strategies to assist with behavioral management.
- Designed sensory-based play activity additions to the program's curriculum to experientially teach children about self-regulation skill.
- Directly and indirectly implemented program through classroom teaching and consultation roles.

Phase 3: Teen Group

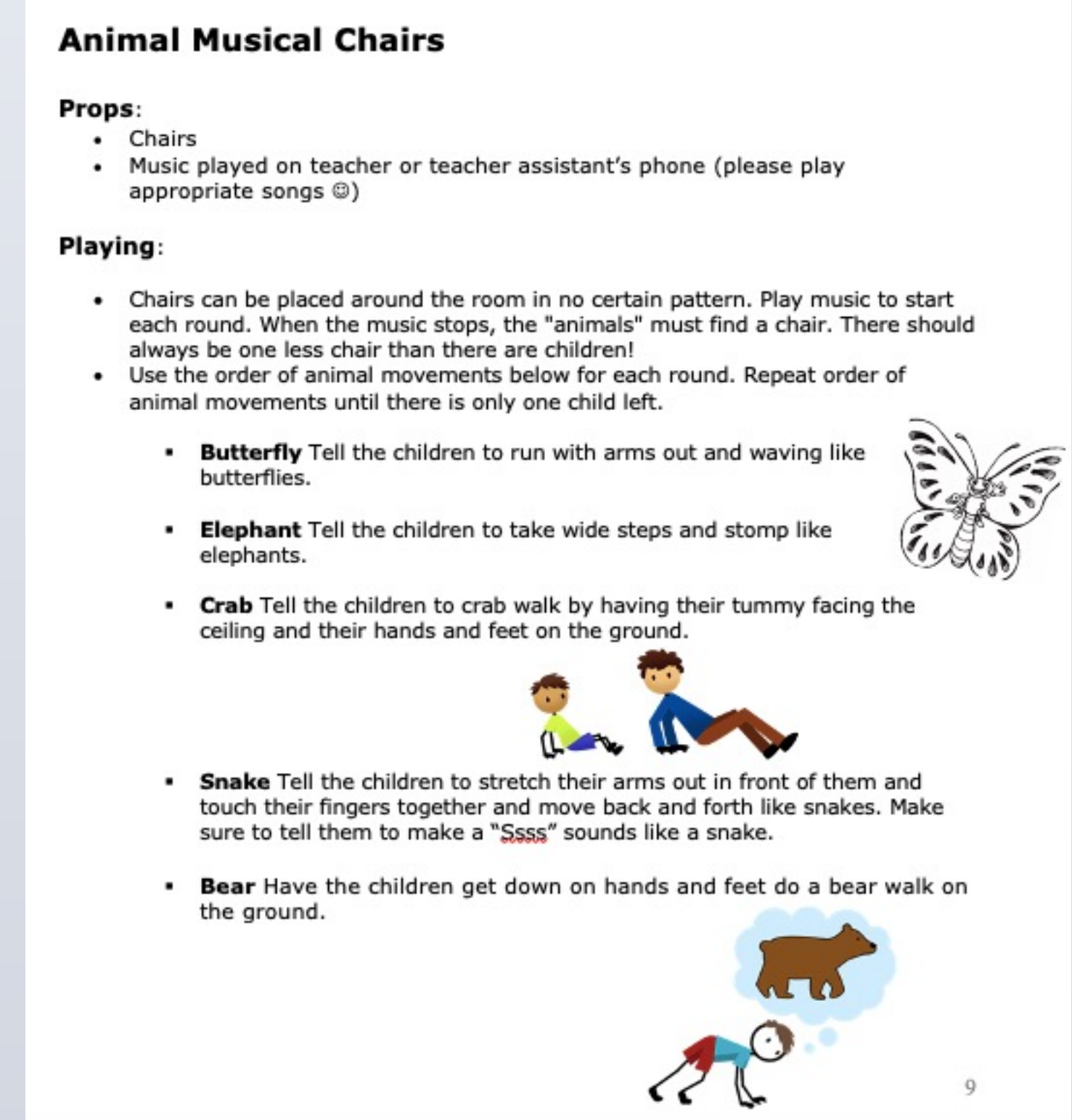
- Attended to the Extreme Team group of 10 middle and high school aged youth.
- This was an additional goal that was set during my time at the capstone site based on a need identified by my mentor.
- Created two devotionals and two group events that centered around mental health related topics and instrumental activities of daily living.

Phase 4: Sustainability

- Created materials to sustain the use of the sensory-based and TIC strategies implemented during the capstone experience.
- Online video was created for all the new volunteers of the children's ministry program.
- Sensory Calm Down Toolbox was created for children that may require individualized one-on-one assistance for self-regulation.

Learning Objectives Achieved

- Student will gain administrative/leadership skills required for program development within a community-based setting through shadowing and assisting capstone mentor.
- Student will design and implement self-regulation and sensory-motor program activities to supplement summer camp curriculum with youth served by the Dream Center.
- Student will complete Alert Program training course and provide education to staff and volunteers on sensory-based strategies.
- Student will facilitate group events for teenagers with occupation-based and mental health focus.



Excerpt from Circle J summer camp curriculum

Implications for OT Practice

- Adult volunteers who worked with the children were educated of the potential for trauma in the children's lives and how this trauma may impact their behaviors. Strategies for appropriate behavioral management were provided.
- Leadership of the children's program were equipped with sensory-based and TIC strategies as well as tools to continue use.
- Children were exposed to sensory-based strategies for self-regulation and have the potential generalize these strategies to be used in different environments (i.e., home, school, recreational facilities, etc.).
- This capstone project serves as an example of how a consulting occupational therapist can identify a need within a faith-based community center and apply clinical reasoning to provide targeted intervention at a community level to children from low SES backgrounds.

REFERENCES & ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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