

Stronger Through Sport

**An Occupational Therapy approach
to supporting child development
through sport.**

A collaboration between UniSA and Therapeak Performance.



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- Andriana Petrakis – Tennis Player, Assistant Coach & Advocate, proudly living with mild Autism

Thank you all for your contributions, dedication, and commitment to enhancing the role of sports in OT.



Disclaimers

Age Appropriateness Disclaimer

This resource is designed primarily for children and adolescents aged 3 to 17 years. While the activities and strategies outlined may be beneficial for a wider range of individuals, they have been specifically developed with this age group in mind.

Professional Guidance Disclaimer

This handbook is intended for parents, caregivers, and OTs in facilitating sport-based interventions. While it provides general guidance and activity ideas, it is not a substitute for individualised OT assessment and intervention. For children with specific needs or challenges, it is recommended that parents and caregivers seek professional advice from a qualified OT to ensure appropriate and tailored support.

Third-Party Recommendations Disclaimer

This resource includes references to external organisations, services, and programs to support children's participation in physical activity and sport. We do not endorse or promote any specific organisation, service, or provider. These references are provided solely as general recommendations for further exploration, and users should conduct their own research to determine suitability.

Problem Statement: Sedentary behaviour in children is rising due to increased screen time and reduced participation in outdoor play and sport. This is impacting their motor, cognitive, social-emotional, and sensory development. OT can help reverse this trend by integrating sport-based interventions that promote holistic growth and well-being.

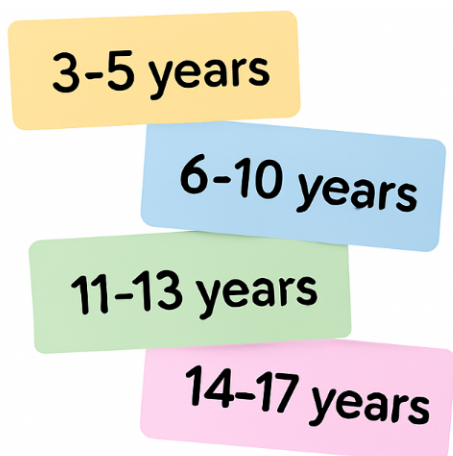
Introduction

The Therapeak Performance Project explores how sport and physical activity can be integrated into paediatric OT to reduce sedentary behaviour and support children's holistic development. The project was developed in response to rising concerns about inactivity among children and the need for stronger connections between therapists, families, and community sports programs. By incorporating sport into therapy, children can build physical, social, emotional, and sensory skills through meaningful occupations like play, teamwork, and movement. This handbook is designed for OTs, parents and caregivers, community sports coaches, and educators who are looking to support children's participation in sport-based activities that align with their developmental needs.

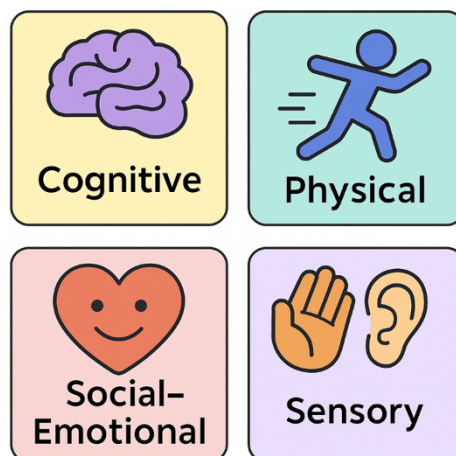
How to use this handbook

This handbook is designed to be a practical resource for OTs, parents and caregivers who are looking to integrate sports into OT practice to support children and adolescents aged 3 to 17 years. It provides guidance on how to use sports-based interventions to enhance children's physical, cognitive, social-emotional, and sensory development while promoting engagement in meaningful occupations.

Age Breakdown



Developmental Domains



Intended Audience



For OTs – This handbook offers practical strategies for incorporating sports-based interventions into therapy sessions, including insights from experienced OTs, athletes, and professionals. It serves as a starting point for designing tailored interventions based on individual client needs.



For Parents and Caregivers – This resource provides guidance on how to support children in engaging with sports at home, in the community, and in therapy. However, it is not a substitute for professional OT services—consulting with an OT is recommended to ensure activities align with a child’s unique needs.



For Educators and Community Organisations – This handbook can help inform strategies for promoting inclusive participation in sports and fostering collaborations between OTs and community-based sports programs.

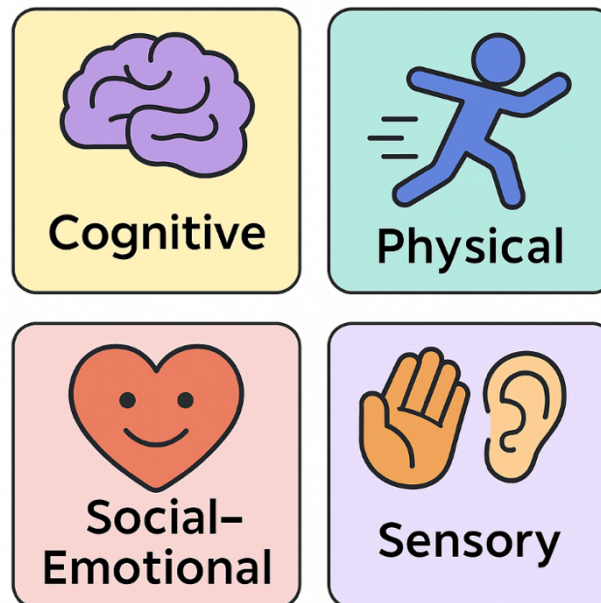
A Flexible Resource

This handbook is not a strict protocol but a flexible guide that can be adapted to different children, therapy settings, and levels of ability. The strategies and activities included should be used as a foundation, with modifications made to suit individual strengths, needs, and goals.

We encourage users to collaborate, experiment, and share insights when implementing sport-based interventions. By working together, we can enhance children’s participation in meaningful physical activities and promote long-term engagement in sports.

Developmental & Foundational Skills

Children develop foundational skills across physical, cognitive, emotional, social, and language domains from birth onwards, and these form the building blocks for everyday occupations like play, self-care, and learning. Skills such as crawling, grasping, imitating, problem-solving, and communication gradually emerge through meaningful interaction with people and environments. Recognising typical developmental milestones helps OTs and caregivers identify each child's strengths and areas that may need support. By understanding how development varies across ages—and is not always linear—interventions can be better tailored to foster confidence, independence, and engagement. This approach aligns with the Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF) and National Quality Standards (NQS), which emphasise holistic, play-based, and responsive learning environments that promote a child's sense of identity, wellbeing, and communication skills¹.



Physical Development

Sport builds foundational motor skills such strength, coordination, balance, and endurance – essential for daily tasks like dressing, playing on the playground, and moving safely at home or school.ⁱⁱ Targeted physical activity interventions, including structured sport, can improve gross motor skills in children with developmental challenges, especially when adapted to their needs and goals.ⁱⁱⁱ

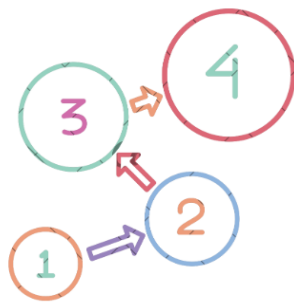
Skill / Body Function	Definition	How to support this skill through sport
Strength	Using muscles to push, pull, or lift. ^{iv} (e.g., carrying a school bag)	Climbing at playgrounds, crawling races, tug-of-war
Coordination	Moving body parts together smoothly. ^{iv} (e.g., using knife and fork)	Play catch, dribble a ball, jump rope
Endurance	Keeping energy up during activity. ^{iv} (e.g., walking to school)	Bike riding, swimming, playing soccer/netball/football etc.
Balance	Staying upright and steady. ^{iv} (e.g., standing to brush your teeth)	Use wobble board, balance disk, walk along a line
Motor Planning	Thinking about and doing movements in the right way. ^{iv} (e.g., getting dressed)	Obstacle courses, martial arts drills, dance routines
Body Awareness	Knowing where your body is and how it moves in space. ^{iv} (e.g., sitting upright at a desk)	Sit on a yoga ball while playing games or doing homework



Cognitive Development

Sport-based OT interventions also improve executive functioning, including working memory, attention, motor planning, and cognitive flexibility.^v The structured, goal-oriented nature of sport helps children practice following rules, shifting strategies, and adapting to new challenges. Research also links physical activity to neuroplasticity (*neuroplasticity is the brains ability to change and adapt by forming new connections*), supporting learning and brain development.^{vi}

Skill / Body Function	Definition	How to support this skill through sport
Attention	Staying focused on a task. ^{iv} (e.g., following instructions)	Short ball games with rules (e.g., Simon Says with actions)
Memory	Remembering steps or information. ^{iv} (e.g., morning routine)	Learn and repeat sport routines or dance moves
Problem Solving	Finding solutions. ^{iv} (e.g., doing a puzzle)	Mazes, treasure hunt, quizzes, human knot, Sudoku
Sequencing	Doing actions in the correct order. ^{iv} (e.g., making breakfast)	Practice sports drills step-by-step (e.g., kick, pass, goal)
Inhibition	Controlling impulses. ^{iv} (e.g., waiting to speak during class)	Stop-and-go games like Red Light, Green Light





Sensory Processing

Sensory Processing refers to the way the nervous system receives, organises, and responds to sensory input from the body and the environment.^{iv} Many sports offer rich sensory input (e.g., proprioceptive, vestibular, tactile), which can help regulate arousal levels and improve body awareness. For children with sensory processing differences, sport can be adapted to provide calming or stimulating sensory input, depending on the child's regulation needs.^{vii}

Skill / Body Function	Definition	How to support this skill through sport
Vestibular	Sensing movement and balance. ^{iv} (e.g., getting in/out of bed)	Swinging, rolling, spinning, scooter board games
Proprioception	Feeling body position and pressure. ^{iv} (e.g., using zippers or lifting bags)	Heavy work; animal walks, bear crawls, or pushing/pulling
Tactile	Responding to touch and texture. ^{iv} (e.g., washing hands)	Textured ball games, barefoot balance play, water sponge toss, parachute activities, sensory obstacle courses on different textured floors (e.g, sand, grass)
Visual Processing	Understanding what is seen. ^{iv} (e.g., finding items in kitchen cupboard)	Aiming at targets, catching, obstacle course navigation

VISION

HEARING

SMELL

TASTE

TOUCH



Social-Emotional Development

Sport provides opportunities for children to practice turn-taking, communication, cooperation, and emotional regulation in real-time, social settings. Participating in team or peer-based activities can build confidence, resilience, and a sense of belonging, while helping children manage challenges like frustration or loss in a supportive environment.^{viii}

Skill / Body Function	Definition	How to support this skill through sport
Turn taking	Waiting for your turn. ^{iv} (e.g., waiting in line)	Mini sports matches (e.g., 2v2 soccer), board games
Teamwork	Working with others to reach a goal. ^{iv} (e.g., tidying up with a sibling)	Group games, relay races, cooperative challenges
Emotional Control	Managing big feelings. ^{iv} (e.g., staying calm when upset)	Play games with winning/losing, encourage fair play
Confidence	Believing in your abilities. ^{iv} (e.g., joining a new group activity at school)	Celebrate small wins during games
Self-Regulation	Adjusting actions to match the situation. ^{iv} (e.g., calming down before bed time)	Include warm-ups/cool-downs, yoga, or breathing breaks
Resilience	Bouncing back after a mistake. ^{iv} (e.g., trying again after falling off a bike)	Encourage child to have another go after mistakes



Activities



QUICK TIPS



Just Right Challenge

Not too easy, not too hard – just right to build confidence and support growth.



Balanced Play

Structure helps build confidence and independence, but don't be afraid to bend the rules!



Follow their interests

Children engage more when activities are linked to what they enjoy!



Make it fun

Keep it playful and pressure-free – enjoyment fuels learning!



Invite others

When appropriate, involving peers or siblings can boost motivation and social skills.

Note: Activities are colour coded by age group for guidance - feel free to adapt!

3-5 years

6-10 years

11-13 years

14-17 years



Soccer Twins Relay

Game summary:

Ask the child to control both balls moving them forward and through the 2 cones located at the other end of the playing area as quickly as possible.

Equipment needed:

- 2x cones / markers
- 2x soft balls

Game setup:

Place 2 cones at one end of the playing area and have the child start at the other end with 2 balls of the same size.

Grading is adjusting an activity to make it easier or harder to suit the child's needs.

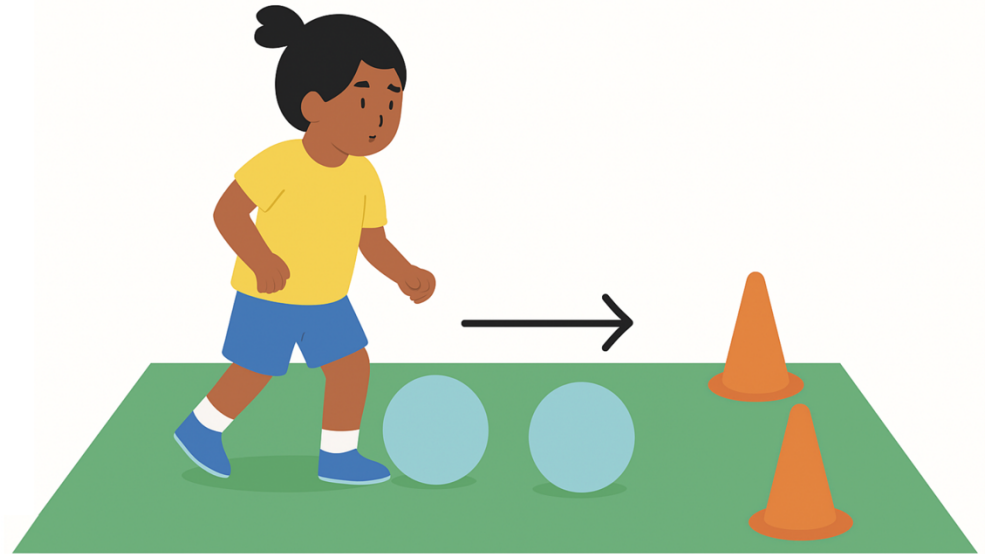


Skills Targeted:

- Balance
- Coordination
- Spatial awareness
- Sensory Integration

Developing these skills will support your child in:

- Participating in games/play with friends
- Engaging in the classroom
- Building confidence in motor skills



Grade up: ↑ difficulty

- Increase distance of playing field
- Use smaller balls
- Encourage faster movement

Grade down: ↓ difficulty

- Start with one ball instead of two
- Reduce the distance between child and cones



Hopscotch

Game summary:

Hop on one foot in each square. If two squares are side by side, land with one foot in each. Stay inside the lines—stepping on a line, outside a square, or in the wrong square means you must start over.



Skills Targeted:

- Balance
- Coordination
- Body Control
- Strength
- Endurance
- Spatial awareness
- Sensory Integration

Developing these skills will support your child in:

- Dressing, bathing, and moving safely on the playground
- Participating fully in school and active play
- Focusing, regulating emotions, and engaging in class activities
- Navigating busy environments like classrooms and hallways
- Joining in group games, sports, and physical education sessions

Equipment:

- Chalk

Alternatives:

- Flat disk markers
- Masking tape
- Hula-hoops

Game setup:

Use chalk to draw a hopscotch board. Ensure the squares are big enough to fit one foot. Number them 1 to 10, or higher if adding more squares.

Grading is adjusting an activity to make it easier or harder to suit the child's needs.

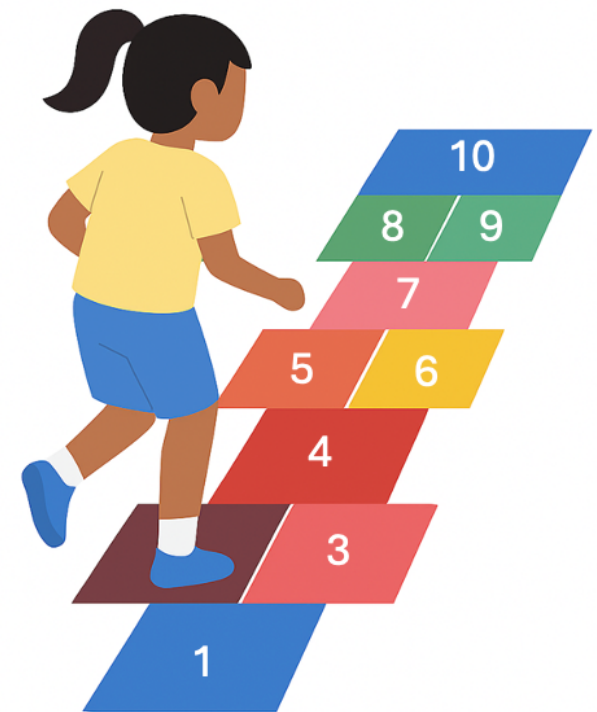


Grade up: ↑ difficulty

- Increase amount of squares
- Introduce a time limit for child to beat each round

Grade down: ↓ difficulty

- Reduce amount of squares
- Child can land on 2 feet instead of 1



Memory Cone Game



Game summary:

Parent/instructor will provide a list of colours (use the colours of the cones) for the child to follow, the child must go from cone to cone in the indicated order while controlling the ball with their foot before returning to the middle (starting position).

Equipment:

- 3 – 4 x cones (different colours)
- 1 x Ball

Game setup:

Place 3 or 4 cones evenly spaced apart, and ask the child to stand in the middle and hold the soccer ball

Grading is adjusting an activity to make it easier or harder to suit the child's needs.



Grade up: ↑ difficulty

- Increase the distance between cones
- Increase the number of cones
- Increase the number of colours given in the instructions

Skills Targeted:

- Memory functions
- Information processing
- Sequencing
- Following instructions
- Coordination
- Visual-motor integration

Developing these skills will support your child in:

- Engaging in the classroom
- Engaging in daily activities such as dressing, bathing, and toileting



Grade down: ↓ difficulty

- Reduce the number of colours given in the instructions
- Reduce distance between cones

Hand-Ball Volleys



Game summary:

Players must work together to reach a set goal (e.g., 30) by hitting the ball back and forth into each other's square, similar to tennis. If a player misses or the ball goes out of bounds, restart the game.

Skills Targeted:

- Teamwork
- Social skills
- Hand-eye coordination
- Gross motor arm control
- Spatial awareness
- Visual-motor integration
- Force production
- Teamwork skills

Developing these skills will support your child in:

- Participating in games/play with friends
- Engaging in the classroom
- Building confidence in motor skills
- Building relationships at school

Equipment:

- 1 x Ball

Game setup:

Ensure you have a clear area roughly a 4m x 4m square. Split playing area in half or quarters (depending on how many players you have). Each player stands in their assigned zone.

Grading is adjusting an activity to make it easier or harder to suit the child's needs.

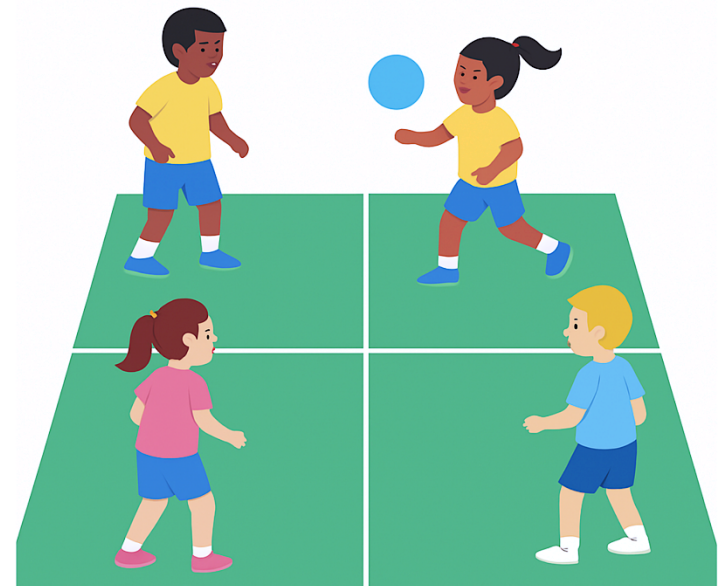


Grade up: ↑ difficulty

- Use a smaller ball (e.g. Tennis ball)
- Increase target goal (30 → 40)

Grade down: ↓ difficulty

- Reduce target goal
- Use a larger ball
- Include more players (3 or 4)



Juggling Balls



Game summary:

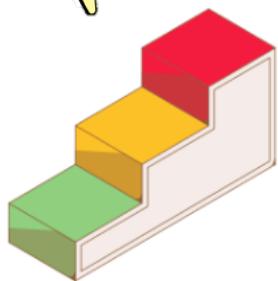
1. One Ball: Toss one ball back and forth between hands.

2. Two Balls: Hold two balls in your strong hand, one in your other. Toss one ball to the opposite hand. Repeat both ways.

3. Three Throws: Start like Step 2. Toss one ball from your strong hand. Before catching it, toss a ball from your other hand. Catch the first, then the second. Repeat.

4. Four Throws: Same as Step 3, then toss a third ball before catching the second. Keep alternating throws.

Grading is adjusting an activity to make it easier or harder to suit the child's needs.



Skills Targeted:

- Hand-eye coordination
- Spatial awareness
- Sequencing
- Visual-motor integration
- Fine motor control
- General coordination

Developing these skills will support your child in:

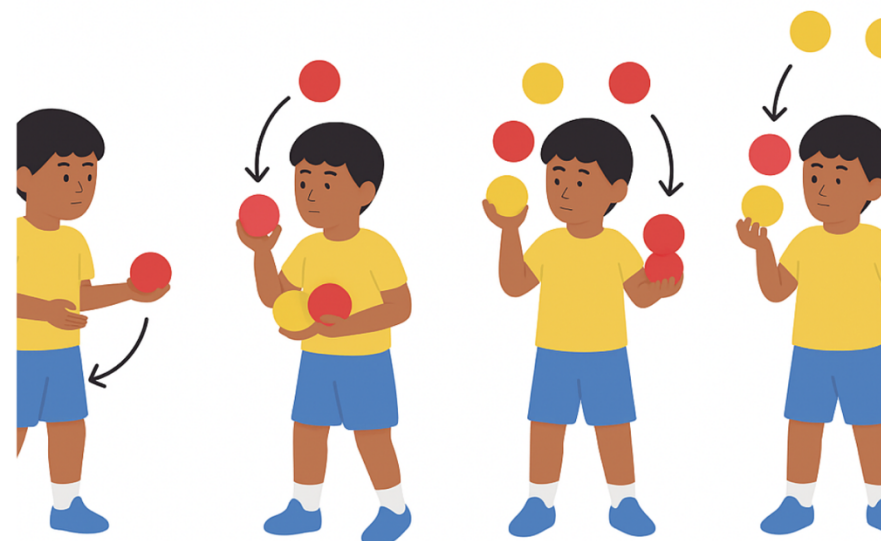
- Participating in games/play with friends
- Engaging in the classroom
- Building confidence in motor skills

Equipment:

- Juggling Balls

Alternatives:

- Bean bags
- Tennis balls
- Hacky Sack



Grade up: ↑ difficulty

- Increase number of balls
- Try different textured and weights
- Add a rhythm or timing challenge (e.g., music)
- Juggle while walking or standing

Grade down: ↓ difficulty

- Reduce number of balls
- Using beanbags (slower, easier to catch)
- Use textured balls with an easier grip
- Juggle sitting down for stability

Velcro Disk Catch & Throw

Game summary:

Using your dominant hand each player will throw the ball back & forth aiming for the opposite hand of the other player (if Velcro-disk is worn on the left hand, throw to the right side of your partners body).



Equipment:

- 2 x Velcro Disk
 - 1 x Tennis Ball
- ** Items often included in pack together***

Alternative:

- Use 2 x buckets to capture the ball

Grading is adjusting an activity to make it easier or harder to suit the child's needs.



Game setup:

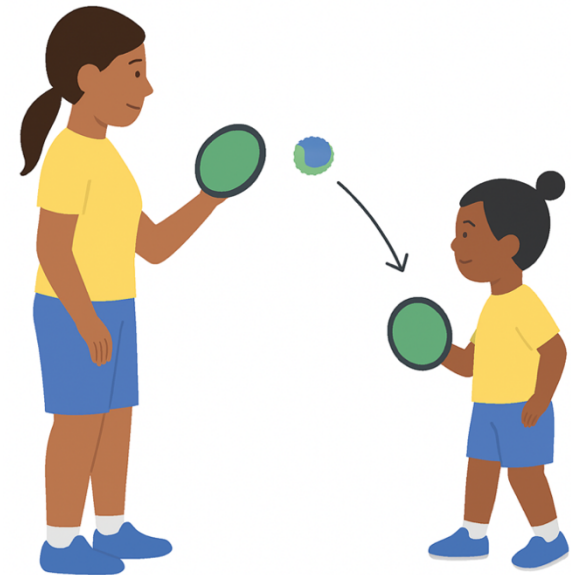
Give the child one Velcro-disk and the parent/guardian take the other. Both players attach the Velcro-disk to their non-dominant hand.

Skills Targeted:

- Hand-eye coordination
- Spatial awareness
- Force production
- Fine motor grasping skills
- Teamwork skills

Developing these skills will support your child in:

- Fine motor tasks such as pencil control, scissor skills, and hand writing
- Engaging in daily activities such as dressing, bathing, and toileting
- Participating in games/play with friends
- Working in a team or group



Grade up: ↑ difficulty

- Increase the distance between players
- Swap the Velcro-disk to the other hand
- Players to throw ball with non-dominant hand

Grade down: ↓ difficulty

- Reduce the distance between players
- Have each player aim for the other's Velcro-disk

Pass, Move, & Receive



Game summary:

Player A passes the ball to Player B and immediately starts moving to a new open space. Player B then returns the pass to Player A in their new location. After passing the ball back Player B moves to a new open space and Player A will pass the ball. Repeat this process.

Equipment:

- 1 x Soccer ball

Game setup:

Have Player A & Player B stand a few metres apart (ask both players to take note of the distance between them as this will be the distance they are required to move). Give Player A the ball and begin.

Grading is adjusting an activity to make it easier or harder to suit the child's needs.



Grade up: ↑ *difficulty*

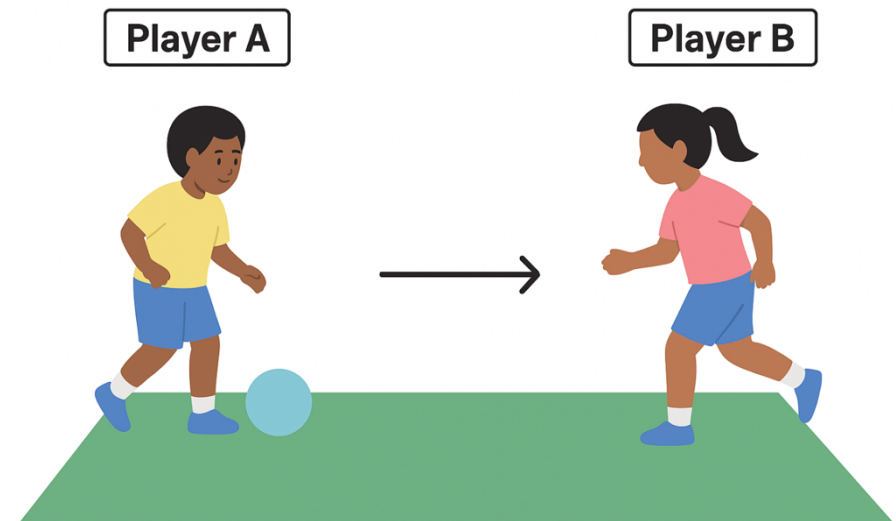
- The receiving player should juggle the ball while waiting (e.g., soccer - juggle with feet, tennis – bounce on racket)
- Increase minimum distance that the player moves

Skills Targeted:

- Balance
- General coordination
- Visual-motor integration
- Spatial awareness
- Force production
- Gross motor control
- Teamwork Skills

Developing these skills will support your child in:

- Participating in games/play with friends
- Engaging in the classroom
- Building confidence in motor skills
- Engaging in daily activities such as dressing, bathing, and toileting
- Working in a team or group



Grade down: ↓ *difficulty*

- Decrease the minimum distance that the player moves

Target Relay



Game summary:

Players move around the marked course, kicking or throwing a ball through or at several different targets around the course

Equipment:

- Cones (Different colours)
- 1 x Ball per child
- Start/Finish marker (masking tape or a sign)

Game setup:

Mark a start/finish line. Set up five evenly spaced checkpoints in a loop using coloured cones. Place a matching-coloured target cone a short distance from each checkpoint.

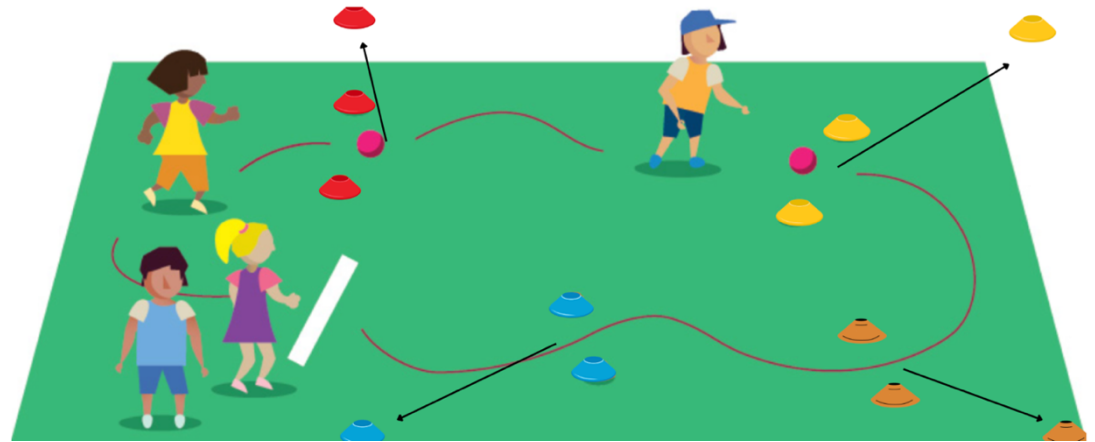
Grading is adjusting an activity to make it easier or harder to suit the child's needs.

Skills Targeted:

- General coordination
- Visual-motor integration
- Spatial awareness
- Force production
- Gross motor control
- Balance
- Teamwork skills

Developing these skills will support your child in:

- Moving safely on the playground
- Participating fully in school and active play
- Navigating busy environments like classrooms and hallways
- Joining in group games, sports, and physical education sessions
- Building confidence in motor skills
- Working in a team or group



Grade up: ↑ difficulty

- Increase distance between checkpoints
- Increase size of relay track
- Increase target distance from checkpoint

Grade down: ↓ difficulty

- Reduce the number of checkpoints
- Bring targets closer to checkpoints
- Reduce the size of relay track

Red Rover, Kick it Over

Game summary:

Players will attempt to dribble the ball across the playing field while trying not to let the defender steal their ball. If the player's ball goes out of field or gets stolen, start again.

Equipment:

- 4 x Cones (2 different colours)
- 1 x Ball per player

Game setup:

Mark out a large rectangle playing field using coloured cones (2 at each end of the playing field). The parent/coach will act as the defender. Defenders stand in the middle of the playing field. All other players line up along the side of the playing field with a ball each.

Grading is adjusting an activity to make it easier or harder to suit the child's needs.



Grade up: ↑ *difficulty*

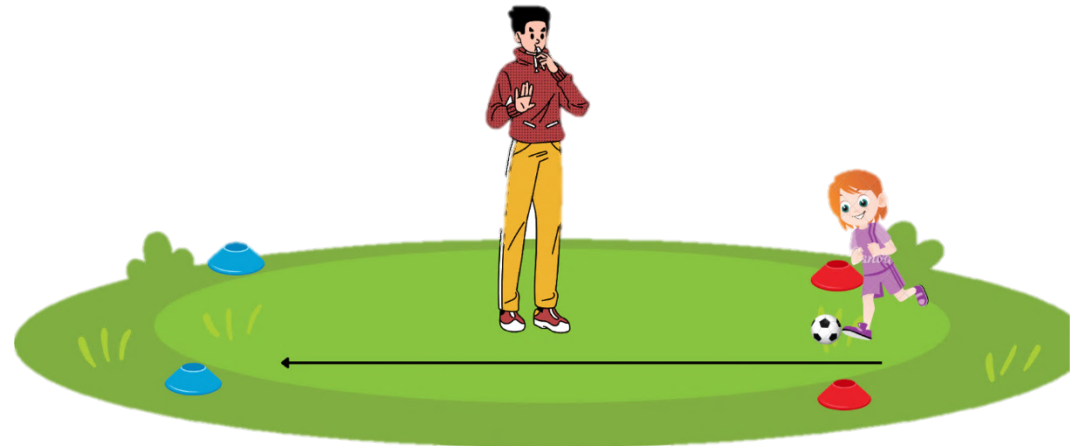
- Reduce playing field size
- Introduce time limit for players to get across playing field

Skills Targeted:

- General coordination
- Visual-motor integration
- Balance
- Spatial awareness
- Force production
- Gross motor control
- Emotional regulation
- Working in a competitive environment

Developing these skills will support your child in:

- Moving safely on the playground
- Participating fully in school and active play
- Building confidence in motor skills
- Joining in group games, sports, and physical education sessions
- Managing the emotions involved in a competitive environment



Grade down: ↓ *difficulty*

- Only allow defender to move side to side
- Increase playing field size

Batter Up



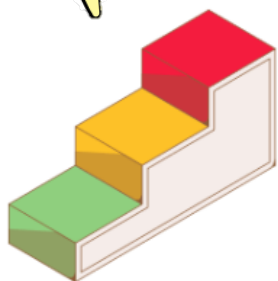
Game summary:

The player hits 4 balls into the field (place balls on the batter cone to hit off) and runs around the marked cone. After the batter hits all 4 balls, fielders must collect all the balls quickly. Once the fielders collect all 4 balls they yell “STOP”

Equipment: Game setup:

- 1 x Bat
 - 4 x Balls
 - 2 x Cones
- Place a cone to identify where the batter will stand, use another cone of the same colour to mark where the batter needs to run. Select one player to be the batter while the parent/coach and all other players select places within the playing field to stand. Swap batter after 2 turns.

Grading is adjusting an activity to make it easier or harder to suit the child's needs.



Grade up: ↑ *difficulty*

- Increase running distance
- Use smaller balls (e.g. Tennis ball)

Grade down: ↓ *difficulty*

- Reduce running distance
- Use larger balls (easier to hit)
- Allow batter to hit ball off the ground

Skills Targeted:

- Hand-eye coordination
- Force production
- Social skills
- Visual-motor integration
- Balance
- Gross motor control
- Working in a competitive environment

Developing these skills will support your child in:

- Moving safely on the playground
- Participating fully in school and active play
- Building confidence in motor skills
- Joining in group games, sports, and physical education sessions
- Playing with friends
- Managing the emotions involved in a competitive environment



Where to go for more support

South Australia

Organisations	Contact Details	What They Do
Inclusive Sport Organisations		
One Culture	08 7080 3894 enquiry@oneculturegroup.org	Inclusive sports and mentoring programs for youth of all abilities and backgrounds.
Inclusive Sports Coaching	0413 319 044 john@inclusiveitconsulting.com.au	Inclusive coaching and skill-building for people with disability to engage in sports.
The Lights Community and Sports Centre	08 8405 6670 thelights@cityofpae.sa.gov.au	Community and sports hub offering inclusive programs and facilities for all ages.
Sense Team Sports	0430 645 086 info@senserugby.co.nz	Sports programs focusing on teamwork, inclusion and skill-building for young people.
South Australian Wheelchair Basketball Association	sawheelchairbasketball@gmail.com	Promotes and develops wheelchair basketball across SA, offering programs and competitions.
Adelaide Active	08 7089 6666 mail@adelaideactive.com.au	Recreational initiative encouraging inclusive physical activity opportunities in SA.
Onkaparinga Disability & Inclusion Team	08 8384 066 disability@onkaparinga.sa.gov.au	Local government inclusion team promoting accessible programs and community engagement.
Disability Service Connectors		
Kudos Services	(08) 8348 6500 contactus@kudoservices.com.au	Providing NDIS Early Childhood services for ages <9 and hands-on supports, therapy, and coordination for ages >9.
Mainstream Sport Organisations		
Tennis SA	08 7224 8100 sareception@tennis.com.au	Governing body for tennis in SA with inclusive programs like wheelchair tennis.

Victoria

Organisations	Contact Details	What They Do
Inclusive Sport Organisations		
Rec West Braybook	(03) 9688 0200 email@maribyrnong.vic.gov.au	Inclusive recreation and fitness centre supporting all abilities in Melbourne.
Access for All Abilities	1800 222 842 request@aaavic.org.au	State-funded program promoting access to community sport and recreation in VIC.
Disability Service Connectors		
Brotherhood of St Laurence	1300 275 634 BSL@ndis.gov.au	A social justice organisation and a community partner of the NDIA, BSL delivers Local Area Coordination and early childhood supports across several Melbourne regions, helping people with disability connect to services and make the most of their NDIS plans.

National or Multi-State Organisations

Organisations	Contact Details	What They Do
Inclusive Sport Organisations		
Deaf Children Australia	(03) 9539 5300 info@deafchildren.org.au	Supports deaf and hard of hearing children through education, advocacy and services.
Blind Sports Australia	(03) 9864 9409 admin@blindsportsaustralia.com.au	Offers sport and recreation opportunities for individuals who are blind or vision impaired.
Sports Inclusion Australia	(03) 5762 7494 mail@siasport.org	Advocates for inclusion in sport and assists organisations to become more inclusive.
Special Olympic Australia	1300 225 762 schools@specialolympics.com.au	Provides year-round sports training and competition for people with intellectual disability.
All Abilities Cricket	mlynch@cricketvictoria.com.au	Modified cricket programs tailored for people with disabilities across Australia.
Sport4All	info@sport4all.com.au	National initiative supporting inclusive sport through education and training.
All abilities cheer and dance	0420 466 064 support@allabilitiescheeranddance.com	Inclusive cheer and dance programs designed for all abilities.
Disability Sports Australia: Abilities Unleashed	https://www.sports.org.au/	National organisation delivering accessible sport programs and advocacy.
The Disability Trust	https://www.disabilitytrust.org.au/	Delivers a wide range of disability support services including sport and rec activities.
Disability Service Connectors		
Disability Gateway	1800 643 787	An Australian Government initiative that helps people with disability, families, and carers access services, support, and information.

Occupational Therapy Insights

The Role of Sport in Supporting Development

Sport is a meaningful and motivating activity for many children. When guided with purpose, it can support development across multiple areas, including motor skills, sensory processing, social interaction, and emotional regulation.

Children are often naturally drawn to games, sports, and active play with peers—activities that reflect their values, interests, and social identity.^{ix} For children with developmental challenges, sport can be clinically adapted to align with therapy goals and promote meaningful participation in everyday life.^x

Research shows that structured and tailored physical activity can enhance self-esteem, confidence, executive functioning, and social skills—especially when designed to meet each child’s unique needs.^{xi} This makes sport a valuable tool for OTs aiming to reduce sedentary behaviour and support holistic development in children.^{xixiii}



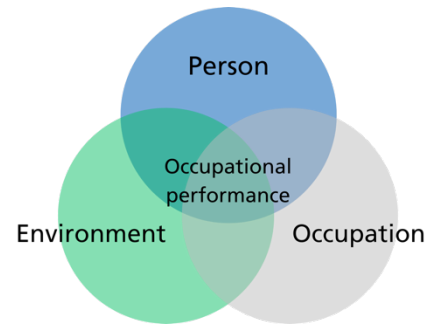
OT Frameworks Supporting Sport-Based Practice

OTs use models of practice to guide their clinical reasoning and ensure that interventions are client-centred, purposeful, and grounded in theory. Two widely used frameworks in paediatric OT – the **Person-Environment-Occupation (PEO) model** and the **Canadian Occupational Performance Measure (COPM)** – support the integration of sport into therapy in a meaningful and measurable way.

The PEO Model

The **Person-Environment-Occupation (PEO) model** examines the dynamic relationship between the person (the child), the environment (e.g., school, home, community), and the occupation (the meaningful activity being performed). Sport fits well within this model, as it can be adapted across all three domains to promote participation and occupational performance.

When there is a strong fit between the person, environment, and occupation, optimal occupational performance is achieved—enabling the child to engage in sport in a meaningful and successful way.

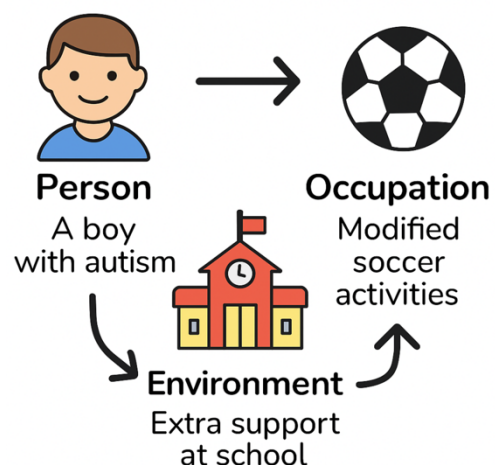


Therapists can adapt:

- **(P) The Person's role** – e.g., encouraging participation as a team member or modifying for individual engagement.
- **(E) The Environment** – e.g., using quiet spaces, visual supports, or peer buddies to support regulation and inclusion.
- **(O) The Occupation** – e.g., simplifying rules, adjusting game speed, or using alternative equipment.

This flexibility promotes successful participation in a meaningful way, ensuring that sport-based activities are developmentally appropriate, accessible, and aligned with each child's needs and goals.^{xiv}

For example, a boy with autism (Person) is supported by extra staff and visual aids at school (Environment), allowing him to participate in modified soccer activities (Occupation), which enables meaningful and successful occupational performance.



The COPM

The **Canadian Occupational Performance Measure (COPM)** is a client-centred tool that supports collaborative goal setting and outcome tracking. It enables therapists to identify occupations that are meaningful to the child and family.^{xv} Sport and physical play are commonly identified by children as important activities they want to do, improve at, or enjoy more.

For example, a child may say, “I want to kick a football with my friends at recess.” This goal can then be used to guide intervention – targeting skills such as balance, motor planning, and social turn-taking. The COPM allows therapists to monitor change by rating both performance and satisfaction over time, providing measurable evidence of progress.^{xvi}



Together, the PEO model and COPM provide a strong foundation for designing and evaluating sport-based OT interventions that are both evidence-informed and personally meaningful.

Sport as a Pathway to Participation

In OT, participation refers to involvement in everyday life activities that are meaningful to the person. For children, this typically includes playing, socialising, learning, and being part of their community. Sport provides a powerful opportunity for participation because it reflects real-life settings where children naturally engage with peers, build routines, and develop important life skills.^{xvii}

Sport supports occupational engagement by promoting motivation, autonomy, and a sense of belonging. Many children see sport as fun and socially valued, which enhances their willingness to participate. These qualities make sport an ideal platform for developing both performance skills and participation outcomes.^{xviii}

OTs can enhance participation by adapting sport to meet the needs of children with developmental challenges. This includes modifying the activity, environment, or level of support to ensure the child can engage meaningfully.^{xix} These inclusive practices not only build skills but also improve confidence and increase a child's sense of agency in their everyday life.^{xx}

When integrated into therapy, sport becomes more than just movement – it becomes a vehicle for helping children participate in their world in ways that are important to them.



Developmental Outcomes of Sport-Based OT

Sport-based interventions in paediatric OT can support outcomes across key developmental domains. When activities are tailored to the child's needs and strengths, they can improve motor, cognitive, social-emotional, and sensory development, particularly for children with developmental delays or neurodivergent conditions.^{xxi}

Refer to Pages 8-11 “Development & Foundational Skills”

Grading and Adapting Sport Activities

OTs use clinical reasoning to apply grading and adaption when designing interventions. These core strategies are essential for creating developmentally appropriate opportunities that build skills and confidence over time.

- **Grading** involves adjusting the difficulty of a task to match the child's current skill level. This might include changing the speed, complexity, or number of people involved. Grading supports the child in engaging with activities at the level appropriate for their current capacity ("just right challenge") fostering confidence and promoting skill development over time.
- **Adaptation** means modifying the activity or environment to help the child participate successfully. This could involve using different equipment, changing the rules, or adding supports like visual cues or a peer buddy.

When used together, grading and adaptation help children engage in meaningful activities, experience success, and work toward developmental goals.^{xxii}

Some practical examples of how to grade and adapt common activities are provided below.

Activity	Grading (<i>easier to harder</i>)	Adaptation (<i>changing how the task is done</i>)
Throwing and catching	▪ Short → long distance ▪ 1:1 → group ▪ Slow → fast	▪ Use softer or larger items ▪ Visual cues ▪ Allow additional time
Obstacle course	▪ Fewer → more steps ▪ Simple → complex moves ▪ No timer → timer	▪ Space out obstacles ▪ Visual cues ▪ Allow support
Kicking	▪ Stationary → moving target ▪ Short → long distance ▪ No rules → game rules	▪ Use cones or markers ▪ Softer/larger equipment ▪ Simplified rules



Evidence-Informed Practice

Sports-based interventions in OT are supported by a growing body of research. Studies show that physical activity, when used intentionally and adapted to meet individual needs, can lead to meaningful improvements in motor skills, executive functioning, social participation, and emotional regulation. When guided by OT frameworks and client-centred goals, sport becomes a developmentally appropriate and evidence-informed tool for practice.

Supporting Evidence

- **Taylor et al. (2024)**
Systematic review found that OT-led physical activity interventions improved developmental outcomes, particularly in motor and social domains, for children with developmental disabilities.^{xxiii}
- **Lubans et al. (2012)**
Physical activity programs were linked to improvements in self-esteem, emotional regulation, and peer interaction in children and adolescents.^{xxiv}
- **Castaño et al. (2024)**
Exercise-based interventions significantly improved gross motor skills in children with autism spectrum disorder.^{xxv}
- **World Health Organisation (2020)**
Recommends regular physical activity for all children to support healthy development and reduce sedentary behaviour.^{xxvi}



Glossary

Term / Abbreviation	Definition
Occupational Therapy (OT)	A client-centred health profession that uses everyday life activities (occupations) to promote health, well-being, and participation in meaningful activities, including self-care, work, play, and leisure. It supports occupational performance by helping individuals develop, recover, or maintain the skills needed for daily life and community engagement. ^{xxvii}
Paediatric OT	A specialised area of OT that supports children in developing skills for daily activities, play, learning, and participation in social and physical environments. ^{xxviii}
Participatory Community Project (PCP)	A collaborative, community-based initiative where students and professionals work alongside stakeholders to address real-world challenges.
The Project	Our PCP project, designed to explore the role of sports in paediatric OT. The aim is to evaluate how sports-based interventions can address sedentary behaviour and contribute to holistic child development by supporting motor, sensory, social, emotional, and cognitive growth.
Physical Activity (PA)	Any movement that involves energy expenditure, including structured activities such as sports and free play, which contribute to motor, sensory, social, and emotional development. ^{xxix}
Sport	Organised or informal physical activities that involve skill, competition, or recreation. Sports provide opportunities for physical, social, and emotional development, helping children enhance coordination, teamwork, and self-regulation. ⁱⁱⁱ
Adaptive Sports	Modified sports designed to allow individuals with disabilities to participate in physical activities with appropriate support and equipment. ^{xxx}
Adaptation	The process of increasing or decreasing the difficulty of an activity to match the client's performance level and therapeutic goals. ^{iv}
Grading	The process of modifying an activity, environment, or tool to enable a person to participate more fully in meaningful occupations. Adaptations are used to enhance function, safety, and independence. ^{iv}
Just Right Challenge	An activity level that is not too easy and not too hard — it provides enough challenge to promote growth and learning, while still being achievable and enjoyable for the child. ^{iv}
Occupational Performance	The ability to carry out activities or occupations in areas such as self-care, productivity, and leisure. It is the outcome of the dynamic interaction between the person, their environment, and the occupation. ^{vii}
Clinical Reasoning	The process used by occupational therapists to plan, direct, perform, and reflect on client care. It involves interpreting information and making informed decisions throughout the therapy process. ^{iv}
Therapeutic	In OT, therapeutic activities are designed with purpose and intention to promote functional improvement, engagement, or well-being. ^{iv}
Strength-Based Approach	A strengths-based approach focuses on a person's abilities and resources, seeing them as resilient and capable, rather than emphasising their limitations. ^{xxxi}
Activities of Daily Living (ADL's)	Everyday self-care tasks such as dressing, eating, bathing, and toileting. ^{xxxii}

Development	The process of growth and change across different domains, including motor and/or physical, social, emotional, cognitive, and sensory development. ^{xxxiii}
Developmental Milestones	Key skills and abilities that most children achieve at predictable ages, including gross and fine motor skills, social interaction, language, and cognitive abilities. ^{xii}
Developmental Delay (DD)	When a child does not achieve developmental milestones within the expected timeframes, which may impact movement, cognition, social skills, or communication. ^{xii}
Motor Development	The progression of movement skills, including gross motor skills (e.g., running, jumping) and fine motor skills (e.g., grasping, handwriting). ⁷
Physical Development	The maturation of the body, muscles, and bones, which influences strength, coordination, and endurance needed for daily activities and sports participation. ^{vii}
Social Development	The process of learning to interact with others, build relationships, communicate effectively, and participate in group activities, such as team sports. ^{vii}
Emotional Development	The ability to recognise, express, and regulate emotions, which is crucial for self-confidence, resilience, and participation in activities like sport and play. ^{vii}
Cognitive Development	The growth of thinking, learning, problem-solving, and decision-making skills, which are essential for understanding rules, strategies, and game play in sports. ^{vii}
Sensory Development	The process by which a child's nervous system receives, processes, and responds to sensory input (touch, movement, body position, vision, sound, taste, and smell). Sensory development supports regulation, motor planning, and engagement in activities such as sports. ^{vii}
Fine Motor Skills (FMS)	The coordination of small muscle movements in the hands and fingers, essential for tasks like handwriting, buttoning clothes, and manipulating objects. ^{iv}
Gross Motor Skills (GMS)	The use of large muscle groups for movement, such as running, jumping, and throwing, critical for sports participation and daily activities. ^{iv}
Coordination	The ability to use multiple body parts together smoothly and efficiently to complete movements. ^{xxxiv}
Neuroplasticity	Neuroplasticity is the brain's ability to change and adapt throughout life by forming new neural connections. It allows the brain to reorganise itself in response to learning, experience, or injury. ^{vii}
Bilateral Coordination	The ability to use both sides of the body together in a controlled and purposeful manner, such as catching a ball or tying shoelaces. ^{iv}
Hand-Eye Coordination	The integration of visual input with hand movements, essential for activities such as catching, throwing, and handwriting. ^{iv}
Visual-Motor Integration	The coordination of visual perception and fine motor movements, critical for activities such as writing and catching a ball. ^{iv}
Motor Planning	The cognitive ability to plan, sequence, and execute coordinated movements, crucial for learning new skills in sports and daily life. ^{iv}
Sensory Processing (SP)	The way the nervous system receives, organises, and responds to sensory input from the body and the environment. ^{iv}
Sensory Integration	The way the brain organises and responds to information from the senses (touch, movement, sound, etc.). When sensory integration is working well, it helps children play, learn, and take part in daily activities. ^{iv}

Emotional Regulation	The ability to manage emotional responses in different situations, which is essential for participating in physical activities and sports, handling competition, teamwork, and responding to challenges. ^{iv}
Muscle Tone	The resting tension in muscles that enables postural control and movement. Low or high muscle tone can impact participation in sports and daily activities. ^{iv}
Postural Stability	The ability to maintain balance and control the body's position during movement or while stationary. ^{iv}
Core Strength	The strength of the muscles in the abdomen, lower back, and pelvis, which support posture, movement, and balance. ^{iv}
Functional Mobility	The ability to move safely and efficiently in various environments to complete daily tasks and participate in activities. ^{iv}
Autism-Spectrum Disorder (ASD)	A neurodevelopmental condition affecting communication, behaviour, and social interactions. Structured sports can support skill development and engagement. ^{xxxv}
Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD)	A condition affecting focus, impulse control, and activity regulation. Sports participation can help improve self-regulation and social skills. ^{xxxvi}
Cerebral Palsy (CP)	A neurological disorder affecting muscle tone, movement, and coordination, often requiring adapted sports interventions. ^{xxxvii}
Developmental Coordination Disorder (DCD)	A neurodevelopmental disorder affecting motor coordination, making tasks like running, jumping, and catching more difficult. ⁸

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