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Occupational Therapy Practice in Child Mental Health: early intervention with vulnerable families and children

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Occupational therapy practice in child mental health: early intervention with vulnerable families and children.

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Children from families with multiple adversities, including social disadvantage, parental mental health, substance abuse, domestic violence and limited social supports, are at risk of developing attention, language, and learning and behaviour problems due to poor attachment, inadequate parenting and lack of stimulation in the first 5 years. Occupational therapists have an important role in supporting the physical and social emotional needs of this group of children at risk of harm.

In this paper we will highlight the key role of Occupational Therapy in promoting parent and child occupations within a multi-modal, integrated, early intervention service for at-risk children within the Northern Sydney Region. This Brighter Futures program is based on a partnership between the Benevolent Society and Northern Sydney Central Coast Health. Examples of occupational therapy intervention with these children will be provided, including the use of social emotional assessments, self regulation strategies and preschool groups. Central to the program are therapeutic strategies which strengthen parenting occupations, and enhance the physical and emotional climate of the child's home environment. Hence, the work of occupational therapy also involves individual or group parent education, home visits and supported play groups.

This early intervention framework incorporating attachment theory, family focused and strengths based approaches, has resulted in positive developmental outcomes for children. A review of recently published results from a pilot study evaluation of the program, will demonstrate the effectiveness of this early intervention model. This paper will conclude by recommending strategies which will consolidate occupational therapy practice with this at-risk group of children.