

Introduction



How to Think Like an OT When Gardening with Kids

Occupational therapists (OT) are highly trained professionals who help people of all ages participate in daily activities that are meaningful and important to them. OTs are skilled in recommending adaptive tools, evidence-based strategies, and unique modifications to help people engage in the activities they want or need to do. For children, this includes basic self-care, play, socialization, and learning.

To do this effectively, OTs must look at the whole picture, including the person, their environment, and the many different elements of the desired task. For example, if a child is having trouble with the steps needed to get set up for lunch, OTs become very curious about why the child is struggling. What is it about this task that is not working? Is the cafeteria set up so that it is difficult to navigate to find a table? Are containers or bags tricky to open? Is the lunchroom too noisy or stressful to concentrate on setting up for lunch? OTs consider all factors that may be preventing success and then make skilled recommendations about how to help them practice and master daily tasks so they feel confident completing them independently.

Gardening is one of the many activities OTs can use to help build skills. For this guide, we looked at 11 gardening activities through this same lens of curiosity and skill, and we encourage you to do the same when working with young gardeners. If a learner has trouble with any of these activities, become curious about why and how you can help the child be successful.



This resource was created by Western Michigan University occupational therapy student Riley Carpenter, who is passionate about increasing participation in and access to gardening for everyone! Our resource guides you through general suggestions for various needs, though these may prompt you to think of other ways you can help young gardeners. Some common modifications you can use to help children when gardening include dividing tasks into many steps and doing them over a few days instead of in one day, incorporating movement or rest breaks during activities, and providing helpful cues or hints verbally or through pictures and written directions. Other children may benefit from equipment that makes activities easier, such as gloves or gardening tools with different handle types.

Every garden activity and learner is wonderfully unique, and there are many different ways to help someone participate in activities. We encourage you to “think like an OT” when working with young gardeners, considering the task, the environment, and the gardeners themselves. Looking at the whole picture can help you be confident in selecting the right modifications and be creative in coming up with your own ideas. And finally, be sure to check in with learners to see whether the modifications are helpful and, if not, to determine what would be more beneficial. We hope you find this information in this resource helpful and useful. **Happy gardening!**

