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Promoting Life Skills Through an Occupation-based Program for Youth in the Juvenile Justice System

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BACKGROUND & PURPOSE

Background: In the United States, more than two-thirds of youth experience at least one traumatic event before age sixteen (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration [SAMHSA], 2023). Traumatic events are known as Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs), which include abuse, neglect, violence, household dysfunction, natural disasters, and economic hardships (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2023). Trauma negatively impacts the structure of the brain, which influences one's overall development, ability to regulate emotions, form healthy relationships, develop coping strategies, maintain a stable work history, and make informed decisions. Youth who have experienced trauma are at risk for gang involvement, substance use disorders, negative health outcomes, and involvement in the juvenile justice system (Jackson et al., 2023). Research has shown that over 80% of detained youth have been exposed to at least one ACE, further placing them at risk for chronic disease, mental health disorders, attempted suicide, financial and social issues, and decreased cognitive functioning (Charak et al., 2019). With access to protective factors including a loving adult or mentor, positive social groups, community resources, and leisure activities, youth may combat the negative effects of trauma. With strategic intervention, negative health outcomes, risk for recidivism, and early death may be prevented.

Purpose: The capstone project aimed to promote life skills through an occupation-based program for youth in the juvenile justice system.

THEORETICAL FOUNDATION

Trauma-informed Care was the foundation of the capstone and focuses on 6 core principles: 1) Safety, 2) Trustworthiness and Transparency, 3) Peer Support, 4) Collaboration and Mutuality, 5) Empowerment, Voice, and Choice, and 6) Cultural, Historical, and Gender Issues. A trauma-informed care approach helped guide the understanding of youths' past and present context, recognize the impact and signs of trauma, and prevent re-traumatization (Center for Health Care Strategies, 2021; Sun et al., 2024).

Model of Human Occupation (MOHO) was used to assess the youths' volition, habituation, and performance capacity. Most youth in the juvenile justice system lacked motivation, the ability to organize occupations into patterns or routines, and occupational engagement. MOHO facilitated the identification of contextual factors and occupational deficits that affect the youths' behaviors and participation (Kielhofner & Burke, 1980; Park et al., 2019).

Lifespan Development was used to analyze youth's growth and changes that have occurred over their lifetime. Youth who have experienced trauma may fall below what is expected of their age group, so restoring development and participation in age-appropriate occupations helped support the promotion of life skills (Cole & Tufano, 2020).

METHODS & ACTIVITIES

Participants: The target population was youth aged 12-17 residing at the Minnehaha County Juvenile Detention Center (JDC) in Sioux Falls, South Dakota. Youth at this facility have been placed into the juvenile justice system due to criminal involvement and delinquency. Life skills groups consisted of up to eight youth and were selected based on gender, length of stay, separation status, and staff availability if the youth required extra staff to be present.

Procedures & Activities: Program development was implemented using an occupational therapy lens. The primary focus was on promoting life skills through an occupation-based program. Life skills sessions included interoception and stress response, emotional identification and self-regulation, coping strategies and stress relief, building healthy relationships and social skills, meaningful occupations and leisure exploration, job readiness skills and career exploration, community resources and getting needs met, healthy habits, roles, and routines, money management and budgeting, and goal setting. A program manual was developed to detail session outlines and activities including discussion questions, individual and group educational activities, and session wrap-ups. To further promote ideal outcomes and trauma-informed awareness, collaboration between the administrative staff, caseworkers, a nurse, classroom teachers, supervisors, and others occurred throughout the program to enhance carryover outside of the life skills groups. Staff education was provided through a presentation that identified the impact of trauma on self-regulation and development of life skills, along with a handout that detailed important areas. Personal and professional knowledge was gained by observing various staff and interviewing classroom teachers to learn about their experiences and techniques when working with the youth, along with understanding the distinct roles and responsibilities of occupational therapy when working in the juvenile justice setting.

Assessment Instruments: The Casey Life Skills (CLS) Short Form is a 20-question comprehensive form that measures independent living skills in functional areas. The CLS Short Form was constructed based on essential components of the Ansell-Casey Life Skills Assessment (ACLSA). The Practical Skills Survey was a 14-question tool developed to assess youths' perception of knowledge and self-awareness of life skills that were not addressed on the CLS Short Form. Lastly, an 8-question Staff Survey was developed to address areas relating to occupational therapy and life skills program topics. This survey allowed staff to provide feedback and aimed to increase staff knowledge of life skills topics, occupational therapy, and trauma-informed care.

RESULTS

- Overall, data analysis revealed that youth benefited from life skills groups.
- CLS Short Form showed an increase in youths' independent living skills including improvement in understanding how to manage mental health, identifying signs of abuse in relationships, and completing daily tasks. Results were significant ($p=0.02$).
- According to the CLS, youth may benefit from further development of financial management skills, forming healthy habits, staying organized, and developing a strong support system.
- The Practical Skills Survey displayed an increase in knowledge and awareness of occupational therapy, the Zones of Regulation, and self-regulation strategies. Youths' ability to identify emotions, coping strategies, and community resources increased. Results were not significant ($p=0.09$).
- According to the Practical Skills Survey, youth may benefit from increased strategies to persevere, gain confidence in themselves, and form goals.
- Only one youth received all 10 weeks of the life skills groups, so the results may be inconsistent and not generalizable.
- The Staff Survey revealed positive results and an increase in understanding of occupational therapy, trauma-informed care, interoception, and how to develop self-regulation strategies. Staff expressed that occupational therapy has the potential to have a positive role on the interdisciplinary team and in the juvenile justice setting.

Table 1.

Pre- and Post-test Mean and Standard Deviation Results

Youth	Casey Life Skills (CLS) Short Form		Practical Skills Survey	
	Pre-test Mean (SD)	Post-test Mean (SD)	Pre-test Mean (SD)	Post-test Mean (SD)
1	4.05	4.0	4.36	4.86
2	4.25	4.35	3.86	4.36
3	3.2	3.85	3.71	4.29
4	4.1	4.8	4.29	3.86
5	2.85	3.8	4.5	4.43
6	2.9	3.15	3.0	3.5
7	4.05	4.5	3.93	4.86
8	3.8	3.8	3.93	3.85
All Participants	3.65 (0.57)	*4.03 (0.51)	3.95 (0.47)	4.25 (0.49)

*Statistical significance; $p \leq 0.05$

Figure 1.

Casey Life Skills (CLS) Short Form: Pre-test and Post-test Mean Scores

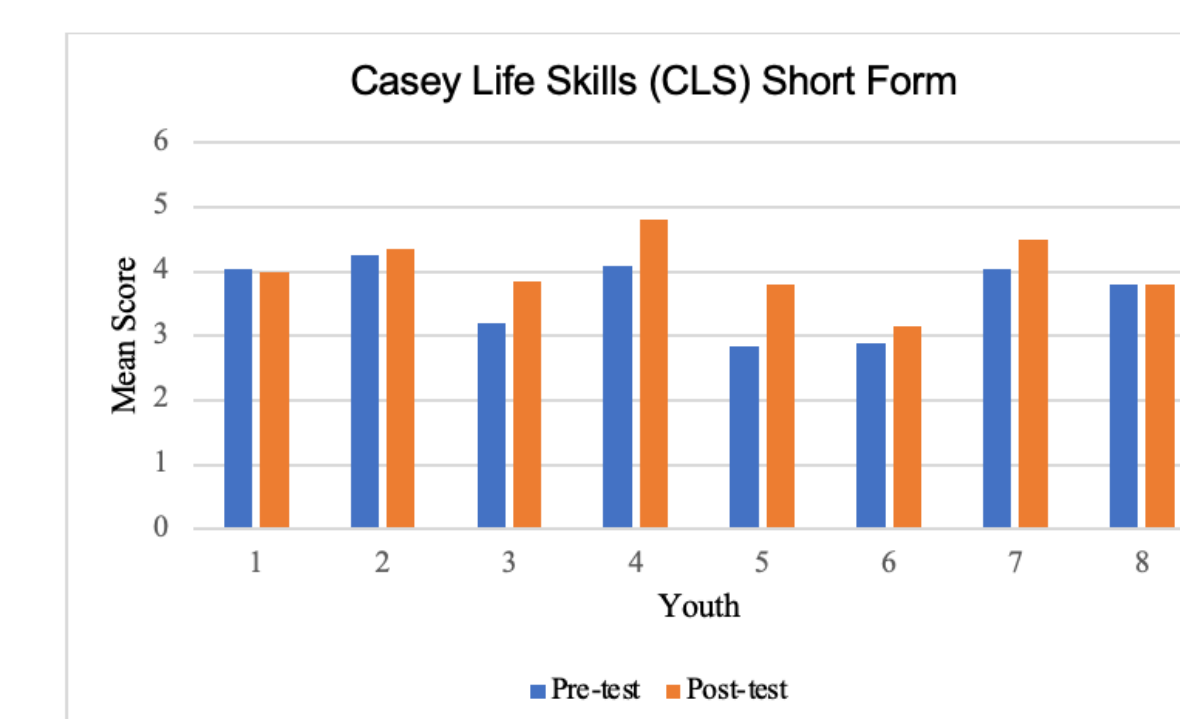
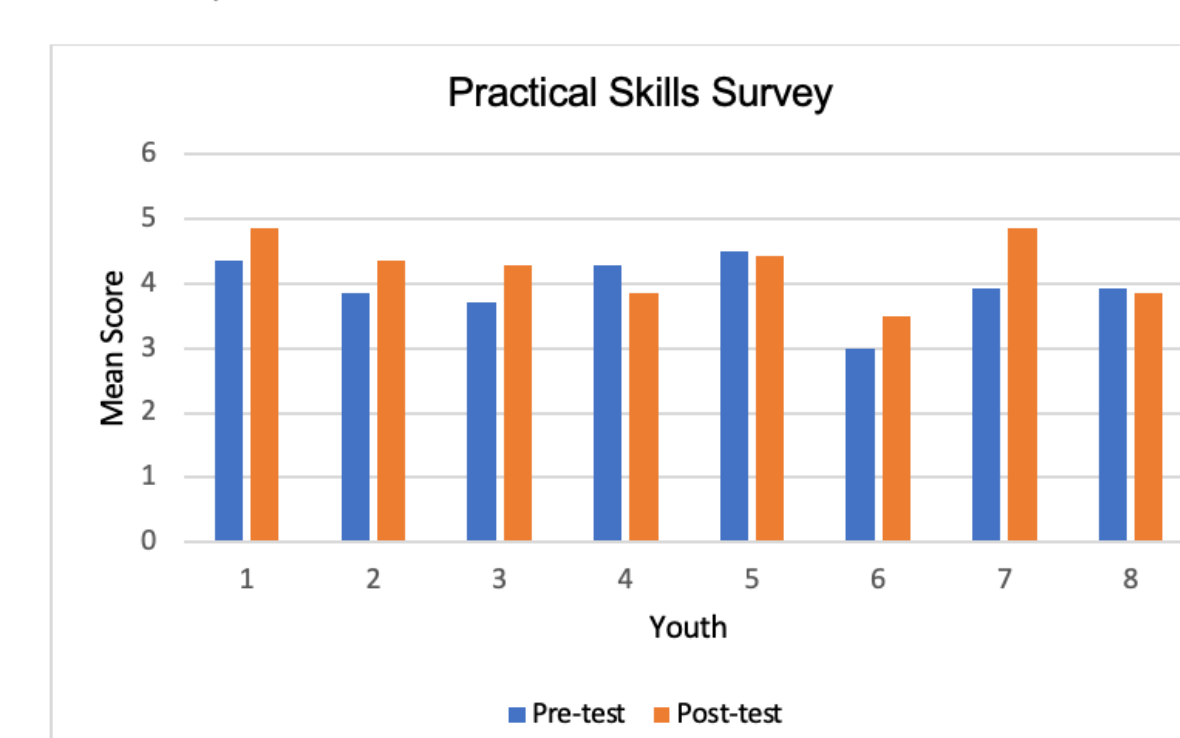


Figure 2.

Practical Skills Survey: Pre-test and Post-test Mean Scores



IMPLICATIONS

- A thorough assessment should be completed to identify additional deficit areas (e.g. Administering the full ACLSA).
- Assessment tools were delivered to youth in a small group setting but may be more beneficial on an individual basis. Some youth had difficulty with reading or writing tasks, which may have impacted their comprehension.
- The lack of significance on the Practical Skills Survey may have resulted from decreased motivation, awareness, understanding, and inconsistent youth attendance.
- Occupational therapy interventions should include individual and group-based sensory strategies to support youth in their environments, self-regulation strategies, life and social skills training, and coping strategies.
- Individual youth diagnoses need to be considered when implementing future interventions and programming (ADHD, PTSD, conduct disorder, substance use disorder, etc.)
- Youth and caregiver training may be beneficial to increase carryover of life skills topics, occupational engagement, and typical development.
- Occupational therapists need to advocate for their distinct role in the juvenile justice system.

DISCUSSION & CONCLUSION

- Most youth in the juvenile justice system have experienced trauma that has impacted their development and behaviors.
- This vulnerable population needs support and access to meaningful occupations to prevent recidivism, negative health outcomes, and early death.
- Occupational therapy can play a significant role in addressing the impact of trauma on development.
- This profession can use a trauma-informed care approach to provide cognitive, sensory, emotional, and social strategies to increase occupational performance and meaningful engagement in the juvenile justice setting.
- Occupational therapy can support youth's daily function and the development of healthy habits, roles, and routines to promote various life skills (Petrenchik & Weiss, 2015).

REFERENCES

Please scan QR code with mobile device for a list of references.

