



## **Occupational Therapy for Neurodivergent Kids**

### **EPISODE #146**

#### **Carrie Wilmot 0:00**

Every time we give kids something to do, are we setting them up for success? Or are we setting them up for failure? What do I know about them to say like, well, the last time we did that it didn't go so well. Maybe we should modify that before they start, so we can give them a better chance of success.

#### **Emily Kircher-Morris 0:16**

Neurodivergent people often have sensory systems that operate a little bit differently. Learning skills to self regulate, through swinging and climbing or lifting may seem a little unusual. However, these are the skills that one type of professional supporting neurodivergent kids gets to use every day. What is it exactly that occupational therapists do? And would someone in your life benefit from the support of occupational therapy? Today, we're excited to bring back Carrie Wilmot, who's going to tell us all about the benefits of OT. That's straight ahead on episode 146, I'm Emily Kircher-Morris, and this is the Neurodiversity Podcast.

#### **Intro 0:33**

What is neurodiversity? This is the Neurodiversity Podcast.

#### **Emily Kircher-Morris 1:26**

So while I have you here, don't forget to connect with us on social media. We are already collecting suggested questions for our upcoming Ask Me Anything episode, and the only way you can submit your questions is by joining and participating in our Facebook group "The Neurodiversity Podcast Advocacy and Support Group." Additionally, you can find both the podcast and me on Twitter and Instagram. And don't forget, if you can take just a couple of minutes out of your day to leave a rating and a review on your favorite podcast platform, it makes a big difference in helping us continue to grow. Carrie Wilmot, aka the toy queen is up next.

**Intro 2:06**

And that's what the neurodiversity podcast is doing, helping them understand us.

**Emily Kircher-Morris 2:54**

Carrie Wilmont is a pediatric occupational therapist and is also known as the toy queen, which we will be sure to ask her about how she came to have that title. She's also the author of the book "Wired Differently: A Teacher's Guide to Understanding Sensory Processing Issues." Carrie was also an expert guest on our episode "Discussing Dyspraxia", so feel free to check that one out. Carrie, we're so happy to have you back on the podcast.

**Carrie Wilmot 3:19**

Oh, thanks for having me back. It's great to be here.

**Emily Kircher-Morris 3:22**

Doing an episode that focuses specifically on occupational therapy has been on our to-do list for quite a while, and in many ways, it's kind of hard for me to believe that it's taken us this long to get there. So I'm a mental health counselor so I frequently collaborate with occupational therapists to support my clients, but I also know that there are a lot of people out there who are really kind of just unfamiliar with the type of work that OTs do. So to start off our conversation, can you give us a brief description of what an occupational therapist is and how they support their patients?

**Carrie Wilmot 3:52**

Yeah, so occupational therapists are trained to teach people activities of daily living, and so there are different specialties within occupational therapy. People might have expertise working with adults, and they might work in a nursing home, they might work with kids, they might work in a school system. Really what we're looking at our, as we're looking at activities of daily living, it's the skills that you need to live. So it might be tying your shoelaces, getting up and putting on all of your clothes, having the strength and the coordination and the balance and your muscles to be able to perform all those motor actions. And for kids that are in the school district that might be developing the grasp patterns that they need to hold their pencils, to cut with their scissors, to understand when they're holding their pencil, letter formation and the way that line needs to move in order to make those letters. So as a profession, we're looking at motor skills, core muscle strength, do you have good strength in your core to be able to sit upright in a chair? Do you have enough strength in your arms and in your hands to develop the muscles where you need to have the right grasp pattern to hold your scissors, to hold your pencil, to pinch snaps, to move your fingers together at the same time to follow a

sequence to tie your shoelaces. And so that's really how it relates mainly to kids, we also have this unique ability to understand self regulation and sensory processing skills, and how that can impact your motor skills.

**Emily Kircher-Morris 5:32**

Yeah, let's talk a little bit more about sensory processing and how that impacts that because I think that's often how a lot of people maybe even find themselves seeking OT services that their child is struggling with sensory processing difficulties.

**Carrie Wilmot 5:45**

As occupational therapists, we look at the traditional five senses sight, taste, touch, sound and smell, but then we add a few different ones, and this is where it gets a little tricky, because people don't really understand, we're actually going to add three additional unknown senses to most people. One of them is called proprioception, and that is having an awareness of your muscles and joints and how to move them through space. So a term that we also include with proprioception is something like body awareness, so it's being aware of things that are going on around you, and, and knowing how to navigate space, just having a good sense of self. So like a trick for that would be, if I closed my eyes, I can describe to you that my feet are actually crossed underneath the chair while I talk to you, right. So without looking and using my vision, I know that my body is in that position. Another sense that we're going to add is the vestibular sense, and that is your sense of movement and balance, and it's in your inner ear, and that's where your coordination comes from how you're able to perform different actions and, and have good balance, you know, are you able to stand on one foot? Are you also able to control your speed at which you're performing motor actions? Like, I guess the best example I could give of something for the vestibular sense would be like a gymnast, right? They're, they're hanging from monkey bars, they're spinning around, they're moving quickly, while they're performing coordinated actions, they have good balance and a good sense of vestibular sense. And then the last one that we're going to add, and this is kind of even, like I didn't even learn about this one in school, so this one is even I would say, within the last couple of years, the newest is called interoception. And that sort of takes proprioception to another level, and it's at like a cellular level, like inside your gut inside your organs having a sense of do you feel hungry? Do you, do you have that connection between what's going on inside your body at an organ level, and how it impacts you on a daily basis. Do you have the feeling you need to say I gotta go to the bathroom? And how does all that pull together?

So here's the tricky part, we need all of those things to work together in harmony to sort of like, you know, be able to get through the day, and there are certain types of disabilities and diagnoses, that you're more challenged to have those kinds of skills. So

therefore, if you're predisposed to having some coordination difficulties, then you know, the system is going to sort of start to get out of whack a little bit, and then we have to figure out if there's a traffic cop inside your brain, all that information is coming inside to you, what information do I pay attention to? What information do I respond to? And for kids that are struggling with sensory processing difficulties, they don't necessarily have what we would call, I guess, a typical response, right? They might hear a sound, it may be just like a buzzing in the other room, and they might run because they don't know what that sound is. So they're, they're misinterpreting information through their sensory system, and then it's leading to these responses that kind of makes everybody go like, why did they do that? Like, why, you know, why are they freaking out when they see a funny looking texture? Like, why are they not wanting to get wet in the bath like, you know, and so why are they struggling with transitions from one activity to another? Why are we having these explosive tantrums that we sort of didn't really know where they came from? So I guess we have this idea of knowing how to look at all these individual systems. And think about terms like self regulation and come up with a plan to say, hey, like, how do we keep that brain in check so that every system is happy so we can actually do those activities of daily living and perform those skills, the way our teachers wanted us to perform them in a way that is, you know, accurate and on demand so that we can survive in the world as it is today, so it's it's a lot.

**Emily Kircher-Morris 8:10**

Yeah, it is a lot, and I think also, you mentioned self regulation is especially related to say, for example, emotional regulation. But I think that also kind of falls along with executive functioning skills, there are a lot of those pieces that all go together. So an occupational therapist can also help with those pieces beyond just the motor coordination stuff.

**Carrie Wilmot 10:35**

Exactly, yeah, cuz I think we have, I guess that's kind of the cool part is that we sort of see things at a different level, right? Like you get some disciplines that are focused on, and not that, like speech therapists and physical therapists don't have this understanding of self regulation to because over time, I think almost every discipline, you have to learn it, right, because then you start to realize that I am going to be the most effective therapist, and I'm going to be the most effective parent, if I figure out how all that stuff works. And then you know what, it makes so much more sense because the way I'm asking kids to do things, the way I'm giving them directions, the way I'm showing them what I want them to do, the way I'm preparing them for that transition, you know, it sort of checks all the boxes, and then you realize, like, wow, they're making progress. They're, they're learning all these skills, because we're looking to see if their mental state is in the right frame of mind to start before we give them hard things. And if

it's not, let's not give them the hard thing yet. Let's prepare them mentally, and in a way that will help them be at their best so that they can learn and focus on the learning that's going to happen or the skill that we want them to perform right after.

**Emily Kircher-Morris 11:45**

As a mental health counselor, specifically working with neurodivergent clients, I do find that I've pulled a lot from like, I'm not a speech language pathologist, but I've pulled a lot like to understand how pragmatic language skills impact emotional regulation and commute because if you can't communicate with somebody, and you don't understand how to use those pragmatic language problem solving skills, that's going to cause you to feel emotionally dysregulated. If you're experiencing the sensory discomfort, or you're unaware of those internal body signals that are giving you the signs of that emotional dysregulation that's maybe on the horizon, that's going to be much more difficult for you to then be proactive about handling that or self advocating for it. There is just a lot of overlap, and I think that as clinicians, as therapists, as educators, as parents, the more we can take that holistic view, it's going to just be better for kids, because that's, you can't discount how all of those things interact.

**Carrie Wilmot 12:42**

Exactly, and I think the important part, Emily, too, is that just because you have poor body awareness right now in this moment doesn't mean that it wouldn't be better tomorrow, your skills are all dependent on where your sensory state is in that moment. And something that happens today can definitely impact what's going to happen for you tomorrow, and you might not think like, hey, that inadvertent trip to the bouncy trampoline place we took last night randomly at five o'clock in may, you know, was the cause of the tantrum at eight o'clock the next morning getting to school because they got so much sensory input in that trip, or the routine got off, and then we ate dinner late, you know. And so I think when we're looking at self regulation as a modulation disorder, the important piece that people need to understand that we as OTs understand is that it can be cumulative, but there are things that you can do to help change it. But this isn't also something that needs to be a forever thing, it's a state of mind in the moment that we can work towards making better over time, once we understand, like, what specifically does your sensory system need to function? And there's lists, right, we can all go online and you can go you know, we can Google sensory fidgets because we think, you know, in order to pay attention, everybody needs a sensory fidget. And you're gonna find squishy ones, bumpy ones, stretchy ones, slimy ones, icky ones, ooey ones, glittery ones, you know, like, it's hot now it's like a whole thing, right? There's hundreds to choose from, and we're gonna buy one that looks cool to us and hand it over to a kid or client and they're gonna be like, nope, right, you know, or one day, they're gonna love it, and the next day, they're gonna be like, nope, you know. And so it's so tricky for

people because it's muddy, and it's difficult, and it's really hard to sort of figure out sometimes because changes are not the same. And as kids get better, it is because they get older, it can get easier because we can predict things but that doesn't mean that puberty is not gonna hit and we're gonna have some hormone changes and things are going to be different.

**Emily Kircher-Morris 14:50**

Yeah, I think that's part of the reason why it's so important to emphasize self advocacy, for them to be able to recognize what their own needs are. And then not only to know how to commit, but also who to communicate it to like, who are the people that can help me find the video that works or have an escape plan for an environment that's giving me sensory overload.

**Carrie Wilmot 15:11**

Yeah, and so as occupational therapists who we help teach, we, you know, when kids are really little, we're doing activities with them to help kids build those core skills, right, we want to make sure they're strong enough that they're, they have good motor planning that they have the right grasp patterns to do all these complicated skills, and then we're also educating parents on activities that they can do at home. And you know, that self regulation piece is so important to be a collaboration between everybody, because it's how you perform across the day. I mean, I could work with a child for 30 minutes, 40 minutes, and I can get them pretty well regulated, and send them home, but there's four days in between when I might see them again, and there's a lot of things that can happen in that timeframe. So it's really about, you know, educating kids to understand through different kinds of curriculums, like, how am I feeling? Where is my energy level at? Am I, is my energy level too high? And they'll say no, and you're like, well, I see you spinning in your chair, and you're hanging upside down, and I don't know why I'm talking to your feet, while your head is kind of hanging over the edge of the chair, you know, so you know, we have to give them those cues and talk out loud, you know, well, you're saying that your energy level is good, like you can do your homework right now. But, you know, let me take a picture of you, I want to show you what I'm seeing, and it doesn't look like you're ready, so how can we get you ready to do this, next thing that's part of, you know, do you need a break? Do you need a snack? Do you need to go run around outside and to jump on the trampoline? You need to do some exercises? Like what can we do to get your mind in the right state of mind, so that when we sit down and do those things that are going to probably be hard, like, you know, math homework, and, and that is where, you know, I've done a lot of research and, and stuff on executive functioning myself in the last couple of years, because I didn't realize until I had worked with kids, for so long, like how we just don't always get we'll give kids an assignment and you look at the page, and I'm thinking to myself, like I can barely

keep my eyes open, there's 7000 numbers on that page, like, where do I start? Where do I go, you know, and these sensory kids, aren't your kids who are going to be like, I'm excited to figure this out they're like, oh, no, not today, you know, and that's gonna look like a couple of different things. For some kids, it's going to be a total shutdown, you know, I'm not doing it, and it's going to look like they're being rude. And there's other kids who are gonna scribble all over the page and just write numbers over done, you know, and I think it's important to understand that executive functioning piece, like, every time we give kids something to do, are we setting them up for success? Are we setting them up for failure? And are there things that we can do that I can do that I can predict? Because I know that child or that is my clients, you know, or that is my son, you know, like, what do I know about them to say like, well, the last time we did that, it didn't go so well, maybe we should modify that before they start so we can give them a better chance of success. And I find more often than not, that sometimes it's just that, it's not a great fit for an environment. It's not necessarily that there's personality differences with how people and kids connect, or there's just not an understanding of what they believe is behavior that kids are providing, you know, we have to look beyond the behavior and say, well, why?

**Emily Kircher-Morris 18:39**

What's underneath it?

**Carrie Wilmot 18:40**

Yeah, why, why are they reacting that way? Do they consistently react that way every you know, you don't want to make them mad all the time but gee, every time I give them math, I kind of find them under the table. So like, you know, am I giving them multiplication and their skills are in subtraction, you know, like, we have to sort of really think about how we provide things and what they're being given and really how to help them achieve success.

**Emily Kircher-Morris 19:05**

I think one of the areas that's really changed a lot in how we support neurodivergent people is in recognizing that teaching them to mask their differences is not always the best way to support them. So how does occupational therapy provide support in a neurodiversity affirming way that is not just trying to teach people to act as if they're neurotypical?

**Carrie Wilmot 19:27**

Well, I think we all have to just, part of what I have done as my education especially when I worked in the school district was to educate teachers on all of our sensory

differences, really, that we have to kind of normalize the fact that it's we're all different what works for you doesn't work for me and I think that's that's the tricky part is there's just a lot of misunderstanding about about self regulation in general. And the fact that different people have different needs and what works for you might not work for me and and you know what you can have structure, but you can't necessarily make rules around specific things. You know, I'll give you an example, like, let's say there's a child in a classroom, and they're trying their best to pay attention, and really, I guess the other part is teaching people how to look at themselves and how they pay attention. You know, before you know it, you have to go somewhere and sit for three hours. What are you bringing to entertain yourself? Do you have your air pods in because you're blocking out sound even though you're not listening to music? Are you bringing gum? Do you have mints? Do you have a fidget ball? Like, what is it that you are doing and having your own awareness of your sensory needs to help yourself focus? And while another person is going to have those same needs, but they might look different, and so I guess, you know, not having specific rules around what it needs to look like for you. You can, no chewing gum in here, no, you know, no tapping, you can't be loud, you can't be annoying, you can't jump, you can't wiggle. You know, like, the hardest part is when you put limitations on those, those activities, you're going to see them and more, you know, and so I guess it's just communication, right? Like, yeah, let's have a conversation about at the root of all of it, I understand that this is what you need, you know, to participate in my activity or in my class, and how can I help support you without making you more anxious or giving you more rules so that you can do what you need to do to get your stuff done, and I will try to not let your sensory needs impact my sensory needs. And I think that's another struggle as people don't really understand, they're like, well, that child is being annoying, and I'm, like, well to you, but the other 20 people in here might not even notice what they're doing, but they're bothering you. So you have to learn about you and do some work on you to kind of figure out how we cohabitate here and understand that we're all in the same boat, it just looks a little bit different.

### **Emily Kircher-Morris 22:02**

Yeah, I think anytime we have those hard and fast rules, we're just setting ourselves up for a battle. My my son's in a freshman this year, and at the beginning of the year, he came home with like a kind of a syllabus with a list of expectations from one particular teacher, and on it, it was like these very hard and fast rules, you will not wear hats, you will not wear hoodies, you will not ever have any sort of headphones on. I'm like, well, wait a second, if you've got some quiet work time, I know for me when I'm working and writing, I have to have some music on usually without any lyrics, that's what works for me. And why would we set these very rigid rules when maybe people learn differently? Like you can say, no headphones or earbuds without prior approval, it's a barrier to kids who learn and think differently.



**Carrie Wilmot 22:54**

Yeah, I don't I wish I knew the answer, it's kind of like the hill, the hill, I'm probably gonna die on Emily, you know, because it's like, and that's the hard part, right? You know, because you end up feeling like, okay, well, now I've got to get an IEP or a 504, right, like now, you know, because I just am asking for, you know, some really basic good teaching strategies to happen here. You know, now, it's not happening, now it's becoming a thing, now I've got to make it a bigger thing by getting, you know, legal documentation in place that really could have just maybe been fine with somebody just being a little bit more flexible. Or having rules, you know, chew gum, do it quietly, please don't snap it, don't stick it on anything, you will lose that privilege if you, you know, if you don't do the right thing. That's it, you know, and I think, I guess maybe this is where, as a therapist for so long, I've worked with so many kids over 20 years at this point, and you realize that they will perform for you when they know that you are on their team.

**Emily Kircher-Morris 23:56**

Yep.

**Carrie Wilmot 23:56**

And when they trust you, and when they respect you, and they know that, you know, they have your support, they'll move mountains for you. You know, and that's the piece as a parent that I struggle with myself, because I know it right, and I know that you can you noticed a lot of these things wouldn't be the power struggles that they become if there was a better understanding of just people in general and communicating and saying, like, I get it, you're little and maybe we can't give you like all the power here. But we can compromise, we can bend like we can come up with a solution and solve this problem together. And guess what? It doesn't have to be equitable to everybody in the room, because what you might need might be different than what somebody else might need.

**Emily Kircher-Morris 24:43**

Flexibility is the key there, like you mentioned, because, yeah, you might go and get a 504. The problem with that is if you put that in your syllabus, that that's the rule, there are a lot of kids who even if they know that they have a 504 are not going to advocate for that, they're going to try to mask, that's when we get back into this, like you have to act as if you're neurotypical. And I don't want to pick on educators at all, because I think that educators get it and they want what's best for kids. I totally understand, I mean, I was a teacher, right? And you worked in the schools, like we understand that 100%, but this is a societal thing. What does it look like in the workplace for people who need

different accommodations? What does it look like in social events? Or spaces? And how do we accommodate individuals who have different needs?

**Carrie Wilmot 25:26**

Yeah, it could be anywhere, it could be, it could be, you know, it's sports, it could be at after school activities, you know, because I've had parents and I, myself have experienced it everywhere. And you can be in one environment is great, and you go to a different environment with a different person and it's not as beneficial as it could be, because there isn't an understanding, per se, and then it becomes a hard conversation, because it's like, okay, well, how much detail do I want to provide here? I don't feel as if I need to, you know, relive everybody's life story here to like, make you understand, but it becomes tricky, it becomes really hard to navigate.

**Emily Kircher-Morris 26:00**

All right, I'm gonna change the subject a little bit, I have to know, how did you get to be the toy queen? Like, was there a coronation ceremony like, what exactly happened here with this, because I need to have this career path.

**Carrie Wilmot 26:11**

So as an OT, right, we play, right, and we play, we play with toys, and I started collecting things, I met my husband, and I had a roommate, and we had an entire room of toys, and didn't have boyfriends and weren't married, didn't have kids, it was kind of weird. And so over time, though, I started, you know, collecting these toys and realizing that just different toys had different kinds of play value, and that the role of toys and games, in our therapy was important, because it wasn't about how we could take something out of the box and play it as the instructions it was about, well, can we use the pieces in a different way? Can we play the game in a different way? How do we manipulate this toy or activity so that I can motivate this child to learn these skills that are difficult for them? And so actually, my husband was the one that came up with the idea years later, he was working in media got into social media, and was like, I think we should start a YouTube channel, so we started a YouTube channel in 2009, which was a long time ago, way ahead of the curve there, of me doing video reviews of why this particular game was important, and how parents or anybody could use that, you know, activity, like I was using it in therapy, to use it with their kids to build their skills. And so that morphed into me starting to be able to attend toy events, working with toy companies, I wrote for about.com as their toys expert writing articles about the best doll houses. So at this point, I do a lot of media activities, where I'm on TV, recommending toys, and I've kind of like made a little space for myself in the toy industry where, you know, they have realized that they're looking for experts that have, you know, unique opinions of their products, and how they can reach consumers and how they can make them better. And

I've been to Germany, I've been to New York, I've been all over the world kind of doing some fun toy stuff, so it's good!

**Emily Kircher-Morris 28:11**

That's awesome, I love it. And you're right, though I mean, I think we kind of get lost on the importance of play. We've had several play therapists at different times who've been guests on the show, and they often talk about this, but play, it's not just important in emotional regulation, or in relationship building. But in motor planning, yes, like what OTs do.

**Carrie Wilmot 28:32**

Right, because, you know, how are you going to teach somebody to do something if they're not motivated? Or they don't like it? Right? And how do you build that trust, if you're not finding the toy, or the game or the license, or, you know, the activity that these kids are really, really interested in, you know, as a as a way to kind of get in the door and to start to earn their trust and build that relationship? Because, you know, in the beginning, I'm not about showing up and making them do all the hard things right away, you know, I need to build a relationship so that when it gets a little bit harder, that we can work through that stuff together. But, but they know that I mean, what I say and I say what I mean, and if I've promised them a reward or or we're going to work together for something that they're going to get a benefit out of it, and it's not, you know, a mountain they're trying to climb with no, you know, no motivation or success.

**Emily Kircher-Morris 29:19**

Absolutely. Well, Queen Carrie, thank you so much for your time today. We really appreciate your expertise.

**Carrie Wilmot 29:26**

Thank you.

**Emily Kircher-Morris 29:30**

I'm always glad this is an audio podcast, because a lot of you would be totally distracted by me swinging back and forth in my twirly chair while I conduct interviews. When I'm on a zoom call, I always have my favorite fidgets in my hands. Personally, I prefer a springy, stretchy wire fidget ring, or one of those little mesh tubes with a marble inside to squeeze and push around. One of the wonderful aspects of occupational therapy is that it lends itself so well to providing neurodiversity affirming care, it can truly help people understand themselves and what works so that they can feel comfortable and calm and regulated. It can also help them build skills that will help them feel more confident with coordination and other activities. Lots of neurodivergent people need wraparound

support to help them navigate a world that isn't always neurodiversity affirming. Occupational therapy is another tool we can add to our toolbox. I'm Emily Kircher-Morris. I'll see you next time on the Neurodiversity Podcast.

**Dave Morris 31:05**

Thanks to Carrie Wilmont for an enlightening conversation, and to Kim Nelson Gustaf and headland for making the music you've heard on today's episode. A reminder: we're almost ready to debut our new course "Foundations of Dyslexia For Educators" in our new learning portal, "The Neurodiversity University". We'll have details about it soon, so be sure to subscribe and set your app to download our new episodes. Our host is Emily Kircher-Morris. Our production assistant and office manager is Krista Brown. The executive producer and studio engineer is me, Dave Morris, for all of us. Thanks for listening, and we'll see you next time. This podcast is a service of the Neurodiversity Alliance.