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CHILDREN WHO ARE BORN PRETERM: ARE THEIR HANDWRITING DIFFICULTIES DIFFERENT TO THOSE OF THEIR FULL-TERM PEERS?

Literature in the area of occupational therapy (OT) when working with children born preterm, albeit scarce, suggests that those born preterm (below 34 weeks of gestation) might present with significantly more handwriting difficulties while in mainstream education when compared to their full-term peers in terms of handwriting legibility, slower writing pace etc (Feder et al., 2005).

This paper outlines the methodological approach and main findings of a PhD study, which investigated the role of pediatric OTs when working with children who were born preterm and might present with specific learning difficulties when attending mainstream primary schooling. The study employed a mixed methodologies approach, specifically, a nationwide survey and two, subsequent, online discussion groups to explore, among others, the kind of specific developmental and school difficulties these children might present with.

Findings highlighted handwriting to be the predominant performance area affected in this particular pediatric client group (93.3%). During the subsequent, qualitative part of the study, participants were asked to comment on what constitutes “problematic” handwriting among these children, and which particular performance components/skills relate to this. Findings suggested that handwriting difficulties might be qualitatively, and/or quantitatively different between full-term and preterm children. Sensorimotor, such as visuomotor, difficulties were reported to be more frequent among children born preterm. Comorbidity with other conditions among the latter group can lead to handwriting difficulties being more “severe” in nature. The implications these findings can have for practice (assessment and intervention) are discussed in the paper along with the effect OT can have during early developmental stages.

Questions could relate to: assessment and intervention methods for this group which could be different to any standard methods employed for any other population presenting with similar problems

Key messages for practice: Implications for practice, intervening at early stages, association between early developmental difficulties and problems interfering with school performance (“predictability”).

Reference:

Feder, K.P., Majnemer, A., Bourbonnais, D., Platt, R., Blayney, M., Synnes, A. 2005. Handwriting performance in preterm children compared with term peers at age 6 to 7 years, *Developmental Medicine & Child Neurology*, 47, pp: 163- 170

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