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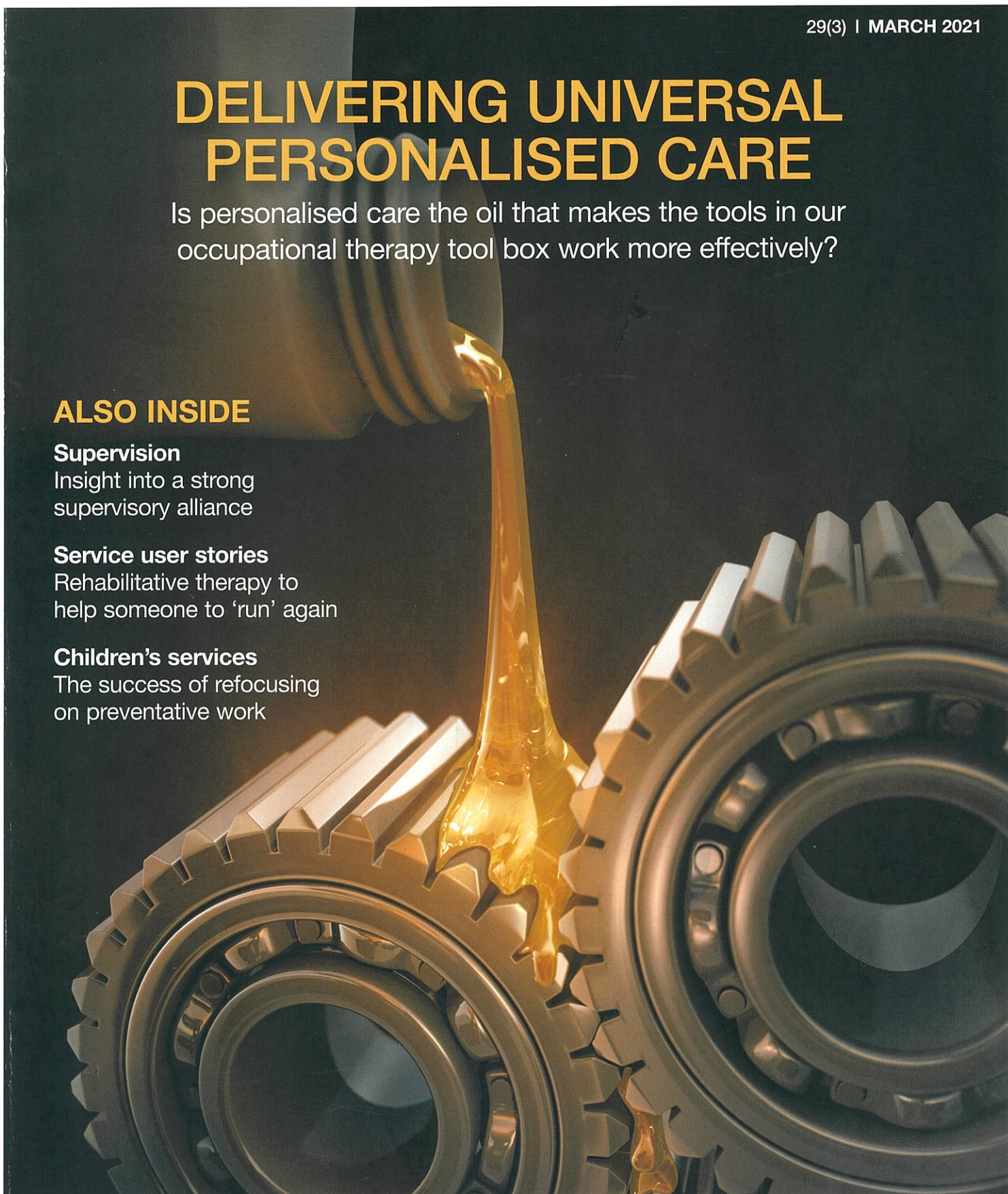
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# Moving the occupational therapy role online



Independent practitioner **Kim Griffin** looks at the impact of online training for teachers and teaching assistants

**T**he COVID-19 lockdown has put a spotlight on digital health and online training. All professionals, including occupational therapists, have had to adapt. Onsite, face-to-face training and conferences have quickly moved online; Zoom has become a household staple.

Providing online training resources for educators and families is something I have been developing and refining since 2017. At that time, there were some online courses. However, these were typically video footage of face-to-face presentations, rather than being specifically designed for online learners.

Fast forward to 2020, and many trainers have moved online. The online training format has quickly become essential during this pandemic.

## Why should we focus on training educators and parents?

RCOT's Improving Lives, Saving Money campaign report *Occupational therapy: Unlocking the potential of children and young people* (2020) identified training as an integral part of universal supports.



Historically, training has been provided to schools in a face-to-face format, but this is resource heavy and the information can be quickly lost through staff turnover. Some NHS trusts have started to include online training for schools and parents as part of their universal offer.

### The benefits of online training for educators and schools

Online training offers a degree of flexibility that face-to-face training does not provide. School staff can watch at a convenient time and at their own pace. Staff have also reported they like that it is possible to review the material again, if it didn't make sense the first time.

Sometimes they also want to review it weeks or months later, when they encounter the issue in the classroom. In addition, online training has the capacity to be a timely and cost-effective solution to providing universal occupational therapy support.

### Developing online resources – my learning journey

My journey towards providing online training started in 2015, when I was working in independent practice. I was using video footage more and more in clinic sessions to give parents a clear demonstration of activities I wanted them to continue with at home. My goal was to help them remember specific instructions and advice, as I wanted to make sure they were following their home programmes correctly.

During this time, I also noted that many of the resources being provided by occupational therapists were still very paper-based. Alongside this, a few teachers were saying things like: 'It's great when the occupational therapist shows me, but I often forget when I go to help the child'; and 'A video reminder would be great.'

These comments inspired me to start developing online resources to help to deliver some of the key messages I found I was frequently repeating.

It took another two years, but at the end of 2017, I piloted my first online course, which explored the senses and how to support children who experience sensory differences. The pilot was offered to parents and teachers at no charge. Sixty people completed the course feedback and gave a satisfaction rating of 4.5 out of five. This encouraged me to continue.

Now, three years later, I offer online training on sensory processing and fine motor skills to both educators and parents. Educators are the largest group of learners completing the training, while health professionals, including paediatricians and social workers, make up 15 per cent of those completing the sensory training.

The sensory processing training consists of three different levels: the first provides a basic introduction to the senses and sensory differences; the second level considers arousal, modulation and the goal of using sensory supports, and there are also recommendations on how to monitor the effectiveness of the supports; and level three covers support strategies for common sensory differences.

The course was deliberately structured in this way to provide a background and safety advice to learners before giving them strategies.

The fine motor skill training consists of education and activity sections. The education section includes information on postural control and grasp development. It also provides recommendations on how to support pencil and scissor use in the classroom.

The activity section is a video-based activity programme comprising of 160 developmentally sequenced fine motor activities. Each activity is demonstrated alongside tips of how to do it correctly and make it easier and harder. Developing the training alongside my clinical role has been challenging, but rewarding.

I work in a mainstream school and often feel worried that I am not supporting my SEN children enough. This has given me more confidence in how to better support my whole class.

### Evaluating the impact of the online training

As occupational therapists, we know of the importance of reviewing and evaluating the impact of our work. So, the next step for me was to measure the impact my training was having.

My theory of change is that by providing training to educators and parents they will have more knowledge and confidence when helping their children and young people. In theory, this should help to improve the outcomes for children and young people. The first assumption is easier to test than the second, and it is where I have started.

### Initial responses to the sensory processing training

To evaluate the updated sensory processing training I have partnered with six schools. Using a pre-, during and post-survey design, I am collecting data on staff knowledge and confidence when supporting children and young people with sensory processing differences.

So far, 45 educators have completed the first review questionnaire and preliminary results are promising. Both knowledge and confidence scores have increased following completion of level two of the training. Questionnaires will be repeated again once educators have completed level three.



One participant commented: 'I work in a mainstream school and often feel worried that I am not supporting my SEN children enough. This has given me more confidence in how to better support my whole class.'

### Taking it further – empirical evaluation

While internal evaluations are a helpful starting point, I know that empirical evaluation is also required. Knowing that this was beyond my own skill level, in 2019 I contracted Coventry University Occupational Therapy Department for academic support. We have set up a study to evaluate the fine motor skills training. I was awarded the 2019 RCOTSS – Independent Practice Innovation Award to support the idea.

The study aims to determine the impacts of an online fine motor skill training programme on primary school education staff knowledge, both theoretical and practical, and their confidence in supporting children's fine motor skill development in school.

Responses from participants are being collected using a pre-, during and post-online survey. The study has grouped eight schools into two groups. Group one received immediate access to the training after completing the initial survey. Group two waited a school term before accessing the training to allow for response comparison.

Unfortunately, due to schools being closed, the data collection for this project is delayed. Preliminary data indicates a positive trend in both knowledge and confidence scores after educators have completed the training. Comprehensive statistical analysis will take place once the data collection is complete.

Participants have also been asked how the training could help them in the classroom. One participant commented: 'I am more aware of subtle difficulties that the children are facing. I have also become more aware of progression steps and activities to support.'

A second said: 'The training has allowed me to pick up on subtle difficulties children have and understand why. There are lots of good ideas given to support children at different levels.'

### A positive start

Whilst the initial data analysis is rudimentary, there is a positive trend of increased educator's knowledge and confidence after completing sensory and fine motor skill online training designed by an occupational therapist.

Given the pressure on services, and the current lockdown, online training is likely here to stay. It has the potential to offer affordable and quickly accessible universal occupational therapy supports to parents and educators of children with additional needs.

Developing the training has been a fascinating learning opportunity. I look forward to being able to report on the full data sets once they are complete. In addition, I am always looking for further partnerships to evaluate my programmes, so, if there are any occupational therapists with an interest in the area I would love to hear from you.

### Reference

Royal College of Occupational Therapists (2019)

*Occupational therapy: Unlocking the potential of children and young people.* Available online at: [www.rcot.co.uk/ilsn](http://www.rcot.co.uk/ilsn) [accessed 3 February 2021]

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