



FUNCTIONAL ADULT OCCUPATIONAL THERAPY

Free Resource Pack 3

Everyday Participation in Daily Routines

An educational and practical guide to support meaningful involvement, choice and dignity for adults with intellectual disabilities

Participation • Dignity • Choice • Routine • Low-arousal support

Who is this pack for?

Occupational therapists, OT students, caregivers, support staff, families and residential-care teams who want to support adult-appropriate participation in daily routines, without turning care tasks into compliance-driven activities.

Designed as a starter educational tool for everyday use

Welcome

Functional Adult OT is built around a simple belief: adults should be supported to participate in daily life with dignity, choice and respect. Daily routines are not only tasks that need to be completed. They are opportunities for communication, autonomy, skill maintenance, connection, responsibility and adult identity.

This resource builds on the previous communication and choice-making pack by asking a practical next question: once a person can express a preference, ask for help, refuse or indicate “not now”, how do we use those communication moments inside real daily routines?

Core approach

Focus on participation before perfection. The goal is not to make a person complete the whole routine exactly as someone else would. The goal is to support meaningful involvement at the person's current level, while protecting dignity, regulation and choice.

Why daily routines matter

Routines such as dressing, grooming, mealtimes, laundry, tidying, preparing a drink or getting ready for an outing can become powerful therapeutic opportunities when they are approached with respect and grading. For many adults with intellectual disabilities, participation may begin with one small step: choosing an item, tolerating a routine, handing over an object, watching, asking for help, or completing one familiar action.

- Daily routines can support independence and confidence.
- They create natural opportunities for communication and choice-making.
- They can reduce passive care by shifting from “doing for” to “doing with”.
- They help staff and caregivers notice skills, preferences, sensory needs and support needs.

Educational foundation

What is participation?

Participation means being involved in a life situation. In this pack, participation does not only mean doing a whole task independently. It can also mean choosing, watching, tolerating, assisting with one step, communicating a need, refusing respectfully, or joining a shared routine in a regulated way.

From independence to involvement

Instead of asking only, "Can this person do the whole task independently?", ask:

How can this person be meaningfully involved?

A person may not be ready to complete a full routine, but they may be ready to choose the first item, complete one repeated step, indicate "finished", or tolerate the routine with less distress. These are still important occupational outcomes.

Evidence-informed ideas behind this resource

- The ICF highlights participation, activities and environmental factors as key parts of functioning, not only diagnosis or impairment.
- The Occupational Therapy Practice Framework places everyday occupations, ADLs, IADLs, routines, social participation and context within the OT domain.
- Self-determination literature emphasises choice, autonomy and opportunities to exercise control as important parts of quality of life for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities.
- Low-arousal support reminds us that the environment, pace, tone and demands can either support participation or increase distress.

Practice reminder

A routine is not automatically meaningful just because it is functional. It becomes meaningful when the person is actively included, respected, and supported at the right level.

The Everyday Participation Ladder

Use this ladder to help staff and caregivers recognise that participation is graded. A person does not need to move through every level in one session. The aim is to find the current level of involvement and gently build from there.

Level	What participation may look like	Example
Level 1: Present	The person tolerates being near the routine.	Sitting nearby while lunch is prepared.
Level 2: Watches	The person observes the routine with support.	Watching staff fold towels or set out toiletries.
Level 3: Chooses	The person makes a choice linked to the routine.	Choosing a shirt, cup, snack or grooming item.
Level 4: One step	The person completes one part of the routine.	Putting socks in a drawer or placing a cup on the table.
Level 5: Shared task	The person completes several steps with support.	Wiping a table with prompts or packing a small bag.
Level 6: More independent	The person completes most of the routine with reduced support.	Making a simple drink with supervision.

How to use the ladder

Start where the person is today. If they are only able to be present near the routine, that is information, not failure. Reduce demands, increase predictability and build one small step at a time.

Quick routine planning guide

Routine	Main focus	Participation opportunities	Support level
Mealtime participation	Choice, sequencing, contribution	Setting the table, choosing a drink, wiping a surface	Low to moderate
Dressing or morning routine	Body awareness, preference, routine readiness	Choosing clothing, placing laundry in basket, packing bag	Moderate
Personal care routine	Tolerance, consent, hygiene preparation	Choosing toiletries, washing hands, applying lotion	Moderate to high
Household participation	Responsibility, motor planning, routine	Sorting laundry, folding towels, tidying personal space	Low to high
Transition routine	Predictability, regulation, communication	Getting ready for outings, moving to the next activity	Moderate

Low-arousal reminder

Keep routines calm, predictable and contained. Offer one small choice at a time. Use a warm tone, short phrases, enough pause time and realistic expectations.

Just-right support

Grade down by

- Reducing the number of steps
- Offering only two choices
- Using real objects or visual cues
- Doing the routine at a calmer time
- Modelling first and reducing verbal load
- Allowing extra processing time

Grade up by

- Adding one more step
- Increasing choice within the routine
- Reducing prompts gradually
- Letting the person fetch or return items
- Adding clean-up or sequencing
- Using the skill in a new setting

Activity 1: Mealtime participation: setting up for a meal

Purpose

Supports routine participation, contribution, sequencing, choice-making, bilateral hand use and shared mealtime identity.

You will need

- Plates, cups and cutlery
- Tray or placemat if useful
- One clear table space
- Optional visual example
- Drink options if offering choice

Step-by-step

1. Prepare a small set of items rather than the full table.
2. Invite the person to choose where to start.
3. Give one item at a time or show a completed example.
4. Name the contribution as they complete each step.
5. Offer a simple choice such as cup colour or drink option.
6. End by linking the task to the real routine: "You helped get lunch ready."

How to grade the activity

Make it easier	Make it harder
Set up for one person only.	Set for two or more people.
Use one item at a time.	Ask what is missing.
Place items close to the correct spot.	Add wiping the table before setting it.
Use a visual model.	Invite the person to carry items safely.
Low-arousal tips	Avoid correcting every placement error. Model gently and keep the pace calm. A slightly imperfect place setting can still be meaningful participation.
Staff/caregiver role	Support success without taking over. Offer real choices and acknowledge the person's contribution to the shared environment.
Functional outcome to notice	Look for initiation, willingness to help, routine familiarity, choice-making and tolerance of mealtime preparation.

Activity 2: Dressing or morning routine preparation

Purpose

Supports body awareness, personal preference, sequencing, ADL preparation, autonomy and readiness for the day.

You will need • Two clothing options • Laundry basket or chair • Optional picture checklist • Mirror if appropriate • Quiet private space	Step-by-step 1. Offer two realistic clothing options. 2. Allow the person to choose by pointing, reaching, looking or saying. 3. Support one step such as placing pyjamas in the laundry basket. 4. Use short phrases and allow pause time. 5. Offer help or break options if the routine becomes stressful. 6. End by naming the choice or step completed.
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How to grade the activity

Make it easier	Make it harder
Offer only two clearly different options.	Ask the person to gather items.
Complete the task seated.	Add packing or laundry step.
Prepare items in order.	Use a morning checklist.
Use one-step instructions.	Reduce prompts gradually.
Low-arousal tips	Dressing can be sensitive. Respect privacy and avoid rushing, teasing, shaming or over-correcting.
Staff/caregiver role	Protect dignity and consent. Give choices where possible and watch for non-verbal signs of discomfort or refusal.
Functional outcome to notice	Look for preference expression, improved routine readiness, reduced distress, body awareness and increased involvement in ADLs.

Activity 3: Personal care participation

Purpose

Supports hygiene preparation, consent, sensory tolerance, sequencing, body care awareness and communication during personal routines.

You will need • Toothbrush, face cloth, brush or comb • Lotion, deodorant or wipes if appropriate • Small basket or tray • Optional help/break card • Private calm space	Step-by-step 1. Place two or three personal care items on a tray. 2. Ask the person to choose the first item or identify what it is used for. 3. Invite one small action such as holding the brush or applying lotion to hands. 4. Offer “help”, “break” or “not now” where appropriate. 5. Keep instructions short and respectful. 6. Finish by placing items back in the basket.
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How to grade the activity

Make it easier	Make it harder
Use one item only.	Add one more grooming item.
Choose a less sensitive body area such as hands.	Ask what comes next.
Model the action first.	Create morning and evening baskets.
Keep the routine very short.	Ask the person to restock or clean the basket.
Low-arousal tips	Personal care can trigger sensory, trauma or privacy concerns. Stop and adjust if the person shows distress, withdrawal or refusal.
Staff/caregiver role	Use respectful language and protect privacy. Do not force participation. Treat refusal as communication and try again later or differently.
Functional outcome to notice	Look for tolerance, consent/refusal communication, item recognition and increased participation in hygiene preparation.

Activity 4: Household contribution: laundry or personal space

Purpose Supports responsibility, categorisation, motor planning, attention, domestic participation and a sense of contribution.	
You will need • Small basket of clean laundry or personal items • Two sorting spaces or labels • Shelf, drawer or basket • Quiet table or floor space • Optional picture labels	Step-by-step 1. Place a small amount of items in front of the person. 2. Demonstrate one example such as towel here, socks there. 3. Invite the person to sort or place one item. 4. Use simple prompts and avoid a large messy pile. 5. Add a folding or packing-away step only if appropriate. 6. End by naming the contribution to the home or room.

How to grade the activity

Make it easier	Make it harder
Use two categories only.	Use three categories.
Use larger familiar items.	Pair socks or fold towels.
Work with a small amount.	Deliver items to the correct shelf.
Keep the task seated.	Add a weekly routine.
Low-arousal tips	A small contained task is less overwhelming than a large pile. Build completion and success rather than creating a demand-heavy chore.
Staff/caregiver role	Create a calm structure and give enough help for success while leaving space for independent decision-making.
Functional outcome to notice	Look for persistence, categorisation, confidence, contribution and improved tolerance of domestic routines.

Activity 5: Transition routine: getting ready for the next activity

Purpose Supports predictability, emotional regulation, communication, sequencing, time awareness and movement between routines.	
You will need • Object cue, picture cue or written list • Bag, jacket or activity item • Timer if useful • Help/break card if used • Calm transition space	Step-by-step 1. Tell the person what is happening using short clear language. 2. Show the object or visual cue linked to the next activity. 3. Offer one small role such as carrying the bag or choosing shoes. 4. Use a first-then phrase if helpful. 5. Allow processing time before repeating instructions. 6. Acknowledge the transition once completed.

How to grade the activity

Make it easier	Make it harder
Use one familiar cue.	Add a packing step.
Give more warning time.	Ask the person to check what is needed.
Offer a break before moving.	Use the routine in a different setting.
Reduce verbal instructions.	Reduce prompts gradually.
Low-arousal tips	Transitions can feel sudden or threatening. Reduce rushing, crowding and repeated verbal demands. Predictability often supports regulation.
Staff/caregiver role	Prepare the environment before giving the instruction. Notice signs of overload and respond before escalation.
Functional outcome to notice	Look for smoother transitions, use of communication tools, increased predictability and reduced distress around change.

Caregiver / staff reflection tool

Use this page after trying a routine. The aim is not to judge the person. The aim is to notice what helped, what got in the way and what to try next time.

Question	Notes
Routine tried	
Participation level noticed	Present / Watches / Chooses / One step / Shared task / More independent
What choice was offered?	
How did the person communicate interest, refusal, help or break?	
What support was needed?	
What helped the person stay regulated?	
What made the routine harder?	
What can we try next time?	

Blank routine planning template

Use this page to plan your own adult-appropriate routine using the same approach.

Section	Notes
Routine name	
Why this routine matters	
Current participation level	
Choice or communication opportunity	
Materials / environment needed	
How to grade down	
How to grade up	
Low-arousal considerations	
Staff/caregiver role	
Functional outcome to notice	

References and suggested reading

- American Occupational Therapy Association. (2020). Occupational therapy practice framework: Domain and process (4th ed.). American Journal of Occupational Therapy, 74(Suppl. 2).
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- American Association on Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities. (2021). Intellectual Disability: Definition, Diagnosis, Classification, and Systems of Supports (12th ed.).
- McDonnell, A. A. (2010). Managing Aggressive Behaviour in Care Settings: Understanding and Applying Low Arousal Approaches. Wiley-Blackwell.

Important note and disclaimer

This pack is intended as a general educational and practical resource. It does not replace individual occupational therapy assessment, clinical reasoning, safeguarding procedures, medical advice, behavioural support planning or facility-specific policies. Always consider the person's communication needs, sensory profile, medical history, swallowing safety, mobility, trauma history, risk profile and personal preferences before introducing a routine.

Use with dignity

Adults with intellectual disabilities deserve meaningful, age-respectful opportunities to participate in daily life. Routines should be adapted to the person, not forced onto the person. Participation should protect choice, consent, privacy and dignity.

Need further guidance?

Functional Adult Occupational Therapy

Practical activity resources for adult-focused, dignified and functional occupational therapy support.

Email: admin@functionaladulttot.com | Instagram: [functionaladulttot](https://www.instagram.com/functionaladulttot)

Real-life skills • Structured routines • Low-arousal support • Meaningful participation • Respect, choice and dignity