Mary Holwell:

But I wonder if you could tell us a little bit about the role of Allied Health professionals, such as yourself, as an occupational therapist or maybe a speech pathologist in or within the early learning centre environment?

Anoo Bhopti:

Yes. So in the early learning, in the preschool years, all of us are involved. So there's OTs, speechie, physios, and sometimes psychologists as well. So the occupational therapist, our role is really around childhood occupations. So we are about childhood occupations at play, but there are also self-care skills. So our children, at a very young age, are they actually doing the self-care skills that they're required to do. So that means engaging in feeding, helping out, even using a spoon, how do they feed? Are they aware of food? Do they have fussy eating or any of that? So self-care, but also dressing. When you dress them, are they offering their arm or their legs? The OT looks at self-care, so that's one domain. Then they look at what children do to keep themselves occupied other than self-care.

Anoo Bhopti:

So how do they play? So we look a lot at play. We look a lot at productivity, so what is it that they produce? That's why we look at the fine motor skills, is what we are famous for. But really we look at productivity, we look at, are they able to hold a crayon and draw? I understand a lot of people say, "They don't like indoors. They always like to be out." But as an OT, I always request educators to plan intentionally so that they're inside and they do get an opportunity to practise those skills, because they're in childcare sometimes for five days a week. And if they're going to be outside all the time, then they're not going to engage in drawing.

Anoo Bhopti:

And these skills are important for school, and I always lead them back to how everything is important for cognition. And if they don't draw, then they can't draw stories and then they can't write stories and they can't progress in their school. So the OTs will look at these areas more so, and they will look at barriers as well. Like, is there a sensory issue? Is there a movement issue? Is there a behavioural issue? And is there a regulation issue? So we look a lot at self-regulation because children get dysregulated and we use lots of strategies for helping them learn how to regulate. So more or less that's what the OTs and our framework is. And those are the things we work on. The speech pathologists, they work mostly as their name suggests, on speech, but really language and communication skills, more so than just spoken speech.

Anoo Bhopti:

So they look at things like, from lisps and stutters, to children with major communication disorders. And their work is all around providing them ways in which to enhance speech and language, but also alternate ways for communication. And the physiotherapists, so they're more mobility focused. And oftentimes I will work together with children who are just learning to walk or they need extra support in sitting. So if they need seating equipment or wheelchairs and they need walkers. So those are the kind of things the physios will also help in, but they also help a lot in zero to 12 age group, where the children are learning developmental motor skills. And the psychologists, usually if they're on a team, that means we do see behaviours of concern with children and that those need to be followed up. And we work very closely in the early years with our team of people and we work closely with the educators.

Anoo Bhopti:

So we want them to follow through, because what really works, and all the evidence points to that, is for the early years, routines-based early intervention works the best. So that means that children need to receive all their interventions through their routines. And if they spend five days or three days or two days in childcare, then I can't really achieve my skills just in a one hour session a fortnight, or the parent can't achieve those skills in three days when they're working, in those three days they work. So all of us, so we are a team, it really takes a village to raise a child. So if we all know that for this child, I'm actually currently working on symbolic play and I'm working for them to have more complex scripts and I'm working for them to be independent in opening their lunchbox and serving them their meal and packing their lunchbox and being organised.

Anoo Bhopti:

So organisational skills, because they're already getting ready for school. So that's what I'll be doing, but the speechie will be saying, "So can you use this? This is what I'm using right now. This is the story, or these are the visuals that we use." So that's how we work together with the educator. And then we kind of assure them, and we do want to support you. So if they're not supporting you, then you can ask for that support. And I understand that, right now it's really hard, but we do zoom calls after hours and we get together and we work out on strategies that can be used. So ask for that, if you need that support and that also kind of tells you that there are people to help, so you don't have to do everything on your own. There are people actually who know these areas. You know the kids really well, the parents know the kids really well, and I know OT really well. So you see how together we make a real nice unit team.

Mary Holwell:

And I was just thinking, as you were finishing off then Anoo, how important it is that, if an educator has received some messaging from an Allied Health professional, and they're not sure why they're doing it or they're not quite sure what it is they're being asked to do. It really is very important that they be honest and say, "I'm not sure why I'm doing this, or I don't quite know how to go about this," because it's not a sign of their lack of knowledge. It's just a sign that there needs to be a little bit more explanation and exploration because that will bring the best outcome for the child. I think sometimes we all feel a little bit, "Oh, I really should know, but I don't quite know." So it's always worth that little bit of questioning and it sounds, listening to you, that Allied Health professionals want to be providing that support. So there's even more reason for educators to be asking.

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