Occupational therapy and sail training

Rachel Wright gets passionate about sail training

As OTs we use words like occupation and occupational deprivation on a regular basis. We believe that what a person does – their occupations – has an effect on their physical and psychological wellbeing.

We recognise that when a person experiences factors beyond their control, such as poverty or illness, this will change how they engage in occupations. OTs have demonstrated over the years that taking part in meaningful, positive occupations and activities improves both physical and mental health and wellbeing. Nowhere can this be better seen than in the world of sail training.

At first glance, adventurous sail training is just another extreme sport – available to those in the peak of fitness and mental endurance. In fact, the reality is somewhat different. Sail training is not the process of learning to sail – it is a much bigger experience.

In the UK alone there are over 50 sail training vessels registered with the national body (ASTO), each offering personal development through adventure at sea. Different charities cater for different groups, each with their own occupational background. Some cater for young people from under privileged or deprived backgrounds, while others provide opportunities for people living with disabilities. Others still are owned by schools and offer pupils an opportunity as part of their curriculum.

Of course, the exercise of simply being on a sailing boat offers little for personal development in itself. Sail training takes no passengers. It relies on individuals finding for themselves the ‘just right’ challenge and requires them to engage and buy into the experience.

Being at sea is a challenging experience for anyone; living for days at a time in a confined space, with people who were strangers just 24 hours before and limited access to home comforts and familiar routines. Unlike residential settings ashore, once you are at sea you are unable to escape or give up when things get tough. The voyage goes on around you, and more importantly, people are depending on you to do your part.

Everyone engages in keeping watch, cleaning the boat and cooking for crewmates. On many vessels this can involve helping to prepare meals for 20 people, in a kitchen (galley) that simply refuses to remain horizontal.

Sail setting can be physically challenging and involves new ideas and skills that depend heavily on teamwork and communication. What challenges one person may not challenge another. For some, the responsibility of steering the ship is what they remember most, for others it is speaking up during a mealtime.

Imagine that you are a young person who has spent much of you life in and out of trouble at home, school and now with the police. The opportunity to spend some time on a sail training vessel is offered and suddenly you find yourself in a situation, perhaps for the first time in your life, where you have responsibilities.

With the support of the adult crew, you achieve things you may never have even attempted at home, and done them well. You’ve cooked a meal for 18 people, safely, and what’s more they’ve enjoyed it and thanked you for it. You’ve learned about managing your emotions, kept your temper when things inevitably go wrong, and you’ve met a new group of people who know nothing about how things have been going at home – a chance to try out a different personality.

Or what about the adult who has lived in residential institutions since childhood due to physical disability? They come aboard a ship where they are expected to take an equal share in activities with their able-bodied crewmates; cleaning, cooking and the more active roles involved in sailing a ship.

They take the helm, learn the ropes, and are even given the opportunity to be hoisted into the rigging in their wheelchair. As a valued part of the team everyone gets the opportunity to contribute by taking regular watches and steering the ship – both vital safety roles that has them maintaining the safe navigation of the vessel whilst their crewmates sleep.

People can start to try out a more involved and independent role in their own life, regardless of the amount of support needed at times.

An exciting developing role is that of sail training in the rehabilitation of people who are newly disabled – a particular focus recently has been with servicemen and women returning from the front line.

For this group of people, sail training as part of a mixed ability crew has provided an opportunity to redevelop their confidence, to gain an understanding of their own, and other people’s disabilities, and to see an empowered life with a disability.

Sail training also benefits individuals who never previously thought of themselves as disabled or disadvantaged – it is an environment that challenges preconceptions and teaches new skills.

Sail training does instinctively what OTs know works; offering meaningful activities that not only challenge physically, but challenge social and emotional skills. It offers individuals the opportunity to learn something new about themselves and raise their personal horizons, before returning to their home lives, hopefully with aspirations and an understanding they did not previously have.

- Rachel Wright, occupational therapist. For more information, contact the Association of Sail Training Organisations (ASTO) at: www.asto.org.uk