



Heather Loney

Occupational Therapist

Can you give us a brief outline of your work history?

I have been working as an Occupational Therapist for over 13 years. I began my career as a Band 5 Occupational Therapist in a rotational post within the Belfast Trust before moving to the Southern Trust. Throughout my career, I have gained experience in various areas of occupational therapy, including community settings, hospital-based medical wards, hand injuries, rheumatology, learning disability, paediatrics, and special schools. Currently, I work within the Southern Trust RISE NI Team (Regional Integrated Support for Education).

What made you decide this career path?

Having a younger brother with Down Syndrome, I had the opportunity to witness the work of Allied Health Professionals (AHPs) and the positive impact they had on our family while we were growing up. This experience inspired me to pursue a career that would allow me to help others. Initially, I was torn between occupational therapy and speech therapy, but I was drawn to occupational therapy due to the diverse opportunities within the field and the creative and problem-solving nature required for the job.

How did you train for this role/educational route?

I completed a 4-year BSc (Hons) degree in Occupational Therapy at the University of Ulster, Jordanstown.

What qualities are required for your job – both personal and professional?

Working within the RISE transdisciplinary team requires strong communication and teamwork skills, flexibility, and organizational abilities. Being an occupational therapist working with children demands energy, creativity, and confidence to step out of your comfort zone on a daily basis.

What does a typical day involve?

Every day within the RISE team is different. We provide support to teaching and assistant staff through telephone consultation, online or live workshop trainings, and by delivering whole-class or small-group programs within schools. For referred children, we conduct assessments in the school environment and provide intervention in school and/or at home, aiming to address developmental difficulties that impact the child's ability to access the curriculum. The RISE team is highly progressive, continuously striving to improve service delivery and resources for the children, school staff, and families we support. There are ample opportunities for personal and clinical skill development through training courses and in-service support.

What do you like best about your job?

I thoroughly enjoy meeting and working with amazing children who, with the right support, can achieve their potential in school. Additionally, empowering staff and parents through training to better support child development on a daily basis is truly rewarding.

What advice would you give anyone thinking of doing your job?

Working as an occupational therapist within the health service is not an easy job, but it is a vital and increasingly recognised service for the skills we offer. In paediatrics, the job can be challenging at times due to growing waiting lists and demands. However, with the right mindset, a willingness to work hard, a commitment to continuous learning and skill development throughout your career, and a drive to improve services for children, I highly recommend occupational therapy as a fulfilling career option.