

SPECIAL NEEDS

Assistive Technology

IS IT RIGHT FOR YOUR CHILD?

By Diane Slonim, SLP, Ph.D. and Beth Breakstone

Emily's parents were very excited! They contacted her speech-language pathologist with the news that her first week in kindergarten was a success! Although Emily tries to speak, it is extremely difficult for her to express and pronounce words and most people cannot understand her. Emily is now using a communication device that talks out loud and she is able to play with her new friends and ask them to "blow big bubbles" and "roll the ball." She can tell her teacher that she "wants more juice" at snack time and, "it's raining!" during circle time.

Welcome to the dazzling world of Assistive Technology (AT). Assistive Technology is simply any device that improves, maintains or increases an individual's functional abilities. It can be something that is available commercially or something that is modified or fabricated. AT is not a panacea, but it offers hopes and dreams for children who have major challenges communicating, learning and participating in activities of daily living. It is a powerful tool that can complement traditional speech, physical and occupational therapies.

EXAMPLES OF AT FOR COMMUNICATION

AT devices can range from very simple ("low-tech") to very complex ("high-tech"). AT not only supports verbal communication, but can also help students who struggle with written communication, reading and math.

Here are a few examples of devices commonly used by speech-language pathologists:

LOW-TECH Visual schedules (e.g., pictures depicting a child's daily schedule at school/home)

TALKING PHOTO ALBUM Communication books/boards

MID-TECH Battery operated communication aids that "talk out loud"

HIGH-TECH Computers/tablets with software/apps using pictures/words that "talk out loud" when activated.

HOW CAN YOU GAIN ACCESS TO AT?

Depending on the age of your child, there are different avenues to gain access to AT:

FROM BIRTH TO AGE 5: Speech, occupational and physical therapists, and special educators can borrow equipment for a child in this age group for up to eight weeks at no charge through the AT Birth-5 Loan Program at Westchester Institute for Human Development (WIHD). Service providers working with families can borrow equipment to try with the child. If the equipment is appropriate, the loan can be extended for an additional three to six months to reach a goal or while the child waits for his ordered equipment.

FOR INFANTS AND TODDLERS (birth to age 3), the need for an AT evaluation will be considered at your child's Individual Family Service Plan (IFSP) meeting.

FOR PRESCHOOL AGE CHILDREN (ages 3 to 5), the need for an AT evaluation will be considered at your child's Committee on Preschool Special Education (CPSE) meeting.

SCHOOL-AGE CHILDREN: For children from kindergarten to age 18 (21 for those in special education), some school districts have staff members trained in AT and may be part of the district's AT Team. They may also have an inventory of AT devices that can be trialed with students. Determining which AT devices and strategies are most appropriate for a child requires a thorough AT evaluation, which can be conducted by the district, school AT Team, or an independent agency or evaluator(s).

WHAT IS AN AT EVALUATION?

An AT evaluation begins with a thorough case history, review of the child's records and interviews with parents or guardians and professionals who are involved with the child. Depending on the child's areas of difficulty, the AT evaluation is conducted

by a specially trained speech/language pathologist, occupational therapist, physical therapist and/or special educator. The evaluation may be conducted in a clinic, the child's home, a childcare center, and/or school. Devices are trialed. The evaluator outlines the findings in a report and recommends AT device(s) that provide the most benefit to the child. Training to integrate the technology into the child's daily life may be recommended.

Do note that school districts, state agencies and medical insurers (private, Medicare, Medicaid) often require a formal evaluation before an AT device will be purchased.

WHEN TO SEEK A FORMAL AT EVALUATION

For parents whose children face a multitude of communication and learning challenges, the decision to consider AT is an important one and should be discussed with your child's teachers, therapists and administrators.

Below are just a few scenarios that may suggest the need for an AT evaluation.

- Despite years of traditional speech therapy, your child is unintelligible to you and other communication partners.
- Your child has hit a "plateau" in his speech/language development.
- Your child cannot communicate his basic needs due to developmental or acquired trauma or disease.
- Your child abandons a device that was once used well.
- Your child has significant fine-motor issues and is frustrated with all writing tasks.
- Your child is struggling with dyslexia, reading or math difficulties.

DISPELLING THE MYTHS

MYTH #1: "I'm afraid my child will never speak if he gets a communication device."

When parents are confronted with their child's

significantly delayed or disordered speech, they may hesitate to seek out an AT evaluation, fearing that the use of a device will inhibit verbal communication. In our practice, we have repeatedly observed the opposite – AT devices often promote spoken language in children who have the ability to speak. Adam, a 20-year-old with autism, despite years of school and private therapy, was still essentially nonverbal. His mother pursued an AT evaluation and now attends training sessions weekly with her son. Not only is Adam learning to use the communication device interactively, he is talking more, as well.

MYTH #2: "I was told my child is not 'ready' for assistive technology."

Sometimes families are told that their child has not developed the necessary skills to use AT. However, if a child has significant difficulties with communicating, learning, writing and reading and is not making progress with traditional therapies, AT should be considered. The earlier AT is introduced, the more the child may progress.

MYTH #3: "AT devices are too expensive; I can't afford to buy them for my child."

School districts are mandated to consider AT devices and services in a child's Individual Education Plan (IEP). An AT evaluation and certain devices may be funded through your school district or through private health insurance or Medicaid. Health insurance will pay for AT devices that are medically necessary and are "durable medical equipment." Some civic or disability organizations may also fund AT devices.

HOW TO GET MORE INFORMATION

The AT Program at WIHD offers free information, referral and device demonstrations of many AT devices, computer software and "apps." Some communication aid manufacturers provide demonstrations of their equipment. Other AT vendors offer free trial periods; others offer rental programs. You can sample a variety of software programs through free trials before purchase. Some companies have a 30-day return policy once a device is purchased.

A FINAL WORD

With the rapid advances in technology, it is helpful to keep an eye on new developments. If your child has abandoned the use of his device, customized AT training may be needed or there may be another communication device more suitable to his needs. Mass production makes new technologies affordable to more people. Although it is very appealing for parents or schools to rush out and purchase a tablet device and download apps for communication or other purposes, it is still important for the child to be evaluated to determine which devices meet that child's individual needs: traditional AT devices or the new iDevices and apps.

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Assistive Technology Resources

THE AT PROGRAM AT WESTCHESTER INSTITUTE FOR HUMAN DEVELOPMENT Conducts evaluations for writing, augmentative and alternative communication (AAC), computer access, academic support, positioning of equipment and visual and hearing supports. Cedarwood Hall, Valhalla. 493-8150. www.wiwd.org.

AMERICAN SPEECH-LANGUAGE-HEARING ASSOCIATION

Information and useful links for users of AAC. Online searchable professional directory. www.asha.org/public/speech/disorders/AAC.

FAMILY CENTER ON TECHNOLOGY AND DISABILITY (FCTD)

Funded by the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Special Education Programs, FCTD provides resources on AT, including fact sheets, training materials and in-depth discussion. www.fctd.info.

TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE ALLIANCE FOR PARENT CENTERS

Many resources for parents including a handout about Assistive Technology for Infants, Toddlers and Children with Disabilities. www.parentcenternetwork.org/national/resources/handouts/html.

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