



How to Try Assistive Technology with Your Infant, Toddler, or Preschooler

When making an important decision such as buying a car, most people want to take a test drive. How does it feel to drive the car? Will it fit your needs? Could you see yourself using this car day to day? Like test driving a car, providing your child with the right assistive technology (AT) is easier if your child has an opportunity to use it, and you have a chance to see if it's the right fit. Some schools and disability organizations have AT lending libraries which allow your child to try assistive technology at school and home before making a decision. Advice on how to find and use assistive technology lending libraries is available in "Explore Assistive Technology and Open New Doors for Your Child", which is available at PACER.org/stc/tikes.



Once your child has access to assistive technology to try, it's time to observe and see if the technology makes a difference. By watching your child interact with AT, you'll be better-equipped to work with professionals to find the best technology to fit your child's needs. Here are some important things to do during your "test drive."

Measuring quality

Whether it is helping your child communicate, play with others, or be more independent, the purpose of assistive technology is to help your child reach his or her potential. You can measure quality looking at the changes you see in your child's ability to do a task when using AT. For example:

- Before using modified toys, a child struggled to manipulate and play with them. After the toys were modified with grips (changes made to the handles) a child was able to confidently hold onto the modified handles and move and play with his toys at home.

Measuring quantity

You can count how many words your child uses in a sentence, or how many letters he or she can write. You can also measure if assistive technology helps your child. Think about the important areas in your child's life where you can gather information, and then measure these while he or she is trying assistive technology. Here are some examples:

- When using a regular marker, a child could only draw one shape (a circle). By using a marker with an adapted grip (one that is thicker) the child was able to draw three shapes (a circle, square, and triangle).

Measuring time and effort

Sometimes your child can complete important tasks but may take longer than his or her typical peers and require more effort due to the disability. Assistive technology can provide your child with a quicker, easier way to complete

the same task. When your child is trying assistive technology, keep track of how long it takes him or her to do certain tasks. Also pay close attention to your child's facial expressions and body language to see if assistive technology is making it easier to complete the task. For example:

- A child's fingers struggled to independently turn the pages of a book, making reading a challenge. After adding Velcro to the top of each page, the child is able to confidently turn pages and look through the book.

Measuring behavior changes

When a child is struggling with tasks due to his or her disability, some of the frustration can be misinterpreted as inappropriate behavior. Assistive technology can help your child manage his or her behavior by providing other strategies, clear instructions, and ways to understand his or her emotions. See if your child's behavior changes when he or she is using assistive technology. Is the AT helping your child feel more confident and in control? For example:

- A child who becomes upset when transitioning from one activity to the next can watch a sand timer to know when an activity will end. The child could then look at a picture to know what the next activity will be. Using this strategy, the student is less anxious and upset when transitioning from one activity to another.

Measuring level of independence

As seen in these examples, assistive technology can boost your child's independence, allowing him or her to accomplish tasks that might otherwise be a struggle to complete. To help your child be as independent as possible with AT, consider the following:

- Be sure both you and your child know how to use the assistive technology you are trying

Anyone can try assistive technology, but it's important to learn how to use it before testing it with your child. Ask a professional what you should know about the device, and how to show your child. Starting small and incorporating AT into familiar routines is a great way to begin.

- Maintain high expectations for your child

While a disability can affect your child's level of independence, your expectations for your child can do the same thing. Assistive technology can open countless doors for your child, enabling him or her to do much more than you may have thought possible. By having high expectations for your child's level of independence, you'll be influencing others to do the same. More information on the importance of high expectations is available in the PACER Center tip sheet titled, "A Parent's High Expectations and Vision are Powerful" at PACER.org.

Finding the right assistive technology for your child can be an exciting and rewarding process for both of you. By following these suggestions, you will be more informed and confident in the decisions you make on your child's behalf and both of you are more likely to be successful.