What is Assistive Technology and How Can it Help My Child?
Tips for Parents

Like most 2-year-olds, Malik is busy exploring his world and developing his own personality. Although Malik cannot communicate verbally, he still has plenty to say thanks to his electronic communication device that "speaks" for him.

At age 4, Angelica loves going to school, but she struggles with change. The use of a visual timer in the classroom helps Angelica be aware of how much time she has left to do an activity, which eases her anxiety and prepares her for the change. This allows Angelica to successfully transition between activities alongside her friends.

The type of tools that help Malik and Angelica are called assistive technology (AT), and they can help your child regardless of age or disability.

What is assistive technology?

Assistive technology refers to a wide range of tools, products, software, and apps that help children with disabilities do something they otherwise couldn't do. In more formal terms, assistive technology is defined by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) as, "any item, piece of equipment, or product system, whether acquired commercially off the shelf, modified, or customized, that is used to increase, maintain, or improve functional capabilities of a child with a disability." Assistive technology can help with nearly any skill, and can be easy to use. AT ranges in complexity from simple, low-tech solutions — a crayon with a large foam grip that helps a child to color independently — to high-tech communication devices that can verbalize the thoughts of someone who needs help to speak.

Why use assistive technology?

When used properly, assistive technology provides more opportunities for children to engage in activities which are important for healthy child development. It can help children develop their sense of independence, enable them to overcome obstacles, and help them confidently

complete tasks that previously required assistance (e.g., feeding or dressing). There are no specific age or skill requirements to use assistive technology, meaning that almost all children with disabilities can benefit.

How can assistive technology help my child?

There are many ways that assistive technology can improve the lives of young children, but one common theme is that AT functions as a bridge between a child's current skills and the skills he or she needs. For example, a child may be able to wash his or her hands after watching a parent do it, but might need some help to do it independently. An

AT solution could be as basic as displaying simple picture instructions next to the faucet for the child to follow. Assistive technology can help with nearly any skill a young child needs. Common skill areas include:

- **Daily routines and activities:** AT, such as special spoons and timers, provide many ways to increase a child's independence by making daily routines and activities such as eating and sleeping easier and more accessible.

- **Social skills and behavior:** AT, such as picture schedules and scripts, can simplify the process of teaching. It can also support the development of important behavioral and social skills, and be a valuable tool to manage challenging behaviors.

- **Sensory:** AT, such as a weighted bear, helps increase or decrease stimulation so that a child can feel more comfortable and secure in his or her environment.

- **Fine motor skills:** Assistive technology offers ways to adapt items so they can be used by young children who struggle with grasping objects.

- **Communication:** Between birth and age 5, a child's vocabulary (both words they understand and words they can use) grows at an astounding rate. Children who struggle to communicate verbally can use technology that gives them their own voice.

- **Literacy skills:** Even very young children can begin to develop literacy skills. Assistive technology can make it easier and more engaging for children with disabilities to understand and practice these skills.

- **Computer access:** Children who struggle to use a computer or mobile device can try adapted controls to accomplish their tasks.

Examples of common assistive technology for young children are available in the TIKES handout, "Examples of Assistive Technology for Young Children." For more information on finding the right assistive technology for your child, consult other TIKES' materials, such as the Child-Centered AT Plan, at PACER.org/stc/tikes.

How can I start using assistive technology with my child?

A simple discussion with a knowledgeable professional can provide you with the general information needed to start exploring AT for your child. If your child is under age 3 and has an Individual Family Service Plan (IFSP), talk with your service coordinator about assistive technology for your child. If your child is 3 or older and has an Individualized Education Program (IEP), talk with your case manager about assistive technology for your child. Your IFSP/IEP team can suggest how AT might help, and discuss examples of potential technology to try.

For more information on how to get started exploring AT for your child, read the TIKES tip sheet, "Explore Assistive Technology and Open New Doors for Your Child." Assistive technology can make a tremendous difference in the life of your child, and it's up to you to begin exploring the possibilities.