



EARLY CHILDHOOD CONNECTION

Information and Resources for Parents of Young Children with Disabilities

Summer 2014

PACER'S TIKES PROJECT HELPS PARENTS, EDUCATORS MAXIMIZE THE USE OF ASSISTIVE TECHNOLOGY

Parents react in many different ways — from big smiles to tears of joy to exclamations of delight — when they first discover what a difference the right assistive technology (AT) can make for their young child with a disability. The challenge is helping parents and educators learn what technology is available and how to use it, which is a goal that is being addressed by PACER's TIKES project — Technology to Improve Kids Educational Success. “We met with a dad recently who was practically in tears as he watched his daughter focus and interact and respond to some very simple switch toys,” said Bridget Gilormini, Director of PACER's Simon Technology Center. “He could see the possibilities for his child. It was wonderful!”

There are two facts that inspired PACER to develop the TIKES project: The use of assistive technology can be a valuable tool for children ages birth to 5 with disabilities, and AT is vastly underutilized among young children. “The numbers are very low — less than 9 percent — for children ages 3 to 5,” Gilormini said, “and virtually nonexistent for ages birth to 2. People just don't think of assistive technology for children that young, yet the solution may be as simple as an adapted toy or modified scissors.”

Great resources for families

Launched in January 2013 and funded by the U.S. Department of Education (Office of Special Education



Programs) as a five-year model demonstration project, TIKES is a partnership between PACER and three Minnesota school districts: Bloomington, Anoka-Hennepin, and Rosemount-Eagan-Apple Valley. The goal is to help parents and teachers maximize the use of AT by children with disabilities ages birth to 5.

The project team is made up of early childhood and assistive technology specialists who are partnering with parents and professionals to develop a model that can be replicated elsewhere. “I think the most important thing for families is to know that PACER's Simon Technology Center is here, and it is a place they can go to help

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their child,” said PACER Assistive Technology Specialist Kasey Miklik. “We have incredible resources — everything from simple pencil grips to the latest eye gaze communications devices and our VGo robots. We are here to support families.”

As part of the TIKES project, PACER is providing hands-on training and coaching for parents and professionals, helping partner school districts improve their lending libraries to complement PACER’S resources, and utilize AT reuse programs so families can buy, sell, or swap used AT devices.

Teachers and parents are learning about the latest technology available, and how AT requirements can be written into a student’s Individualized Education Program (IEP) or Individualized Family Service Plan (IFSP). The TIKES team has developed a practical, Child-Centered AT plan to help teachers and families make the most of the IEP or IFSP process. This is one of several tools the TIKES team has built that will be available through partner school districts and on PACER’s website. At the same time, parents are learning about resources their school districts already offer, new tools their children can use now, and how to use PACER’s services.

Although the outcomes of the TIKES project will have broad impact on the use of assistive technology, the immediate benefits are clear for the families and educators involved. At a recent consultation, the TIKES’s team was showing the parents of a child with a disability how some very basic tools could make a significant difference for their daughter. “The dad’s response was ‘Wow!’ He was so excited to learn about these simple, inexpensive tools, things he had just never thought about before,” Miklik said. “The child might eventually benefit from a sophisticated iPad application or speech-to-text device but for now the dad has discovered a do-it-yourself solution to meet an immediate need. That’s very cool!”

To learn more about the TIKES program and PACER’s AT resources for young children, e-mail Bridget Gilormini (bridget.gilormini@pacer.org) or call (952) 838-9000.

AT at Mealtime

Here are some examples of how Assistive Technology can be helpful at mealtime for young children with disabilities.

Communication placemat — A simple tool that can provide children with a voice at mealtime while also keeping their place at the table clean and orderly. It can be made from construction paper and a few printed pictures, and then laminated for durability.



Cup, plate, utensils — Set the table with a Nosey cup, a plate guard, and Easie Eaters curved eating utensils. The Nosey cup helps children with swallowing or sensory difficulties.



For eating, children can scoop food up easily by pulling their spoon up against the plate guard. Easie Eaters enable children to feed themselves more easily by eliminating the need to fully rotate their wrists, and thicker handles make the utensils easier to hold.

GoTalk 20+ — This rugged, lightweight communication device can be programmed with meal-related items and action words giving a child the ability to make choices and be more self-directed at mealtime.



PACER ANSWERS FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

Do you have questions about your young child's early learning? Judy Swett, PACER's early childhood advocate, provides helpful answers.

Q: Is it possible for assistive technology (AT) to be considered when I meet with the team to write our first Individual Family Service Plan (IFSP) for my child?

A: Assistive technology and other adaptations can be considered at various times while your child has an IFSP. A logical place to start is during the initial IFSP development and writing of the first IFSP document. When discussing your concerns, priorities, and the development of child outcomes, the conversation can involve any way AT can be used to help your child achieve those outcomes. This discussion can also occur at the six-month review of the IFSP, or whenever the IFSP is reviewed and amended. If your family adds new routines or activities, AT can be considered as a way to increase your child's participation.

Q: My child does not use a computer or communication device. Will the IFSP team consider the use of AT for my child?

A: The scope of AT is really broad and includes a wide range of devices and materials. AT is defined in the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) as, "Any piece of equipment or product system, whether acquired commercially or off the shelf, modified or customized, that is used to increase, maintain, or improve the functional capabilities of a child with a disability." In other words, anything that can help your child participate in an activity or perform a skill could be considered assistive technology. For instance, if one of the outcomes on your child's IFSP is about learning to eat independently, an adapted spoon that helps your



child do that could be considered as AT. Looking at daily routines and activities can help the team consider ways AT could be used to increase your child's participation or learning.

Q: My child is not using verbal communication. How do I know what type of AT device she should use to communicate?

A: The IFSP team, which includes you, should talk about your concerns and do an AT evaluation to determine the most appropriate method of communication for your daughter at this stage of her development. For instance, the team may decide that using a picture board would help your child make daily choices — what kind of drink to have at snack time, which toy to play with, or what clothes to wear. A member of the team could help you create the picture board and show you how to use it. As your daughter grows up, the team may recommend a more advanced communication device and you could try different devices at that time.

Have more questions? Call PACER at (952) 838-9000 and ask to speak with an early childhood advocate.

PROJECT KITE: PARENTS, EDUCATORS PARTNERING TO HELP YOUNG LEARNERS ACHIEVE THEIR POTENTIAL

When most parents think about technology, their thoughts go to their personal digital devices — iPads, mobile phones, or laptops. When it comes to using technology for their child’s education, parents may have questions. Through PACER’s Project KITE (Kids Included Through Technology are Enriched), Minnesota parents are discovering that there are countless assistive technology (AT) resources available to help their child with disabilities become more engaged and included at school.

“Parents and educators are often apprehensive about assistive technology. They’re concerned about the cost and complexity, and aren’t sure how it can help,” said Terri Rosen, Project KITE Coordinator for PACER’s Simon Technology Center (STC). “The good news is that AT can be simple and inexpensive, and it can really make a difference.”

Project KITE’s mission is to bring parents and educators together in partnership to increase the inclusion and independence of young learners with disabilities through the use of technology. KITE is a free program that provides assistive technology and training at the child’s school. It is open to Minnesota schools, and to families who have a child with a disability (ages 3 to 8) in an inclusive classroom environment. This project is supported by the Minnesota Department of Education.

Four-year-old Aleena from Eveleth, Minn., is a great example of how the project helps. Aleena is on the autism



Simon Technology Center’s Tara Bruss explains how a switch adapter works to a family.

spectrum and lives in the care of her grandparents. Before participating in the program, Aleena did not know her ABCs and could not hold a pencil. Through Project KITE, Aleena’s grandmother Cathleen Zelinski discovered an AT solution. “She uses applications on the iPad to trace the ABCs and numbers with her finger,” Zelinski said. “Now Aleena knows her ABCs and numbers. If it wasn’t for Project KITE, I wouldn’t have had the opportunity to try things like the iPad.”

Project KITE participants enjoy multiple hands-on opportunities to try new technology including:

- **Use of iPads:** Loaned to teams during training, and loaded with AT apps.
- **Access to PACER’s AT lending library:** A free one-year membership to the AT lending library, which offers more than 2,700 AT options, plus training sessions with an assistive technology specialist.
- **Young Explorers:** Durable, child-friendly computers, valued at more than \$2,500 each, are donated by IBM to each participating school at the end of the program.

Now accepting applications!

Educators and families who would like to have PACER’s Project KITE in their school this fall should e-mail Terri Rosen (terri.rosen@pacer.org) or call (952) 838-9000. Learn more at www.pacer.org/stc/kite/

Deadline is Sept. 30

There is a wide range of AT available for children, said Tina Fredrickson, Special Education Supervisor for the Northland Special Education Cooperative in Virginia, Minn., “from simple do-it-yourself assistive technology tools like pencil grips to higher-end apps for your iPad. Believe me, you will gain something if you participate.”

A team approach to technology

Each Project KITE team is made up of three components: 1. The parent and child; 2. The child’s teacher; and 3. the child’s paraprofessional or professional. Rosen visits each team on five different occasions in their community to deliver workshops of three hours each. Training includes the use of assistive technology for literacy, communication, behavior, and other important skills vital to young learners. According to Rosen, “each Project KITE group focuses on a different community of students, so the focus is always going to reflect the needs of the particular students being served. There are general topics that are important to everyone, but KITE brings the expertise and flexibility to meet individual needs.”

Project KITE lays the groundwork for a collaborative, accessible, technology-rich environment, and trains adults to work together to help young children with disabilities achieve their goals. This approach has worked well for Aleena. When she was anxious about having a new school bus driver — the kind of change in routine that children with autism often find disruptive — her grandmother created a social story (a story told

through pictures) for Aleena to help ease her through the transition. While riding on the bus, Aleena read that story again and again on her Project KITE iPad.

This is the type of positive outcome Project KITE is designed to achieve through a partnership between parents and educators that can make all the difference for a young learner. In this way, the project helps break down barriers that impede understanding and inclusion, and inspires hope for all who want to see each child with a disability reach his or her full potential.

“I have been teaching special education for 18 years,” Fredrickson said. “I have done a lot with assistive technology for many different kids with different disabilities, but from every Project KITE meeting I learned something new.”



PACER Offers Convenient Early Childhood Webinars for Parents and Professionals

Many parents of young children with disabilities lead busy lives and may have difficulty making time to attend PACER workshops. Many workshop topics are available as archived webinars. Please visit pacer.org/webinars/archive-listing.asp to view the following webinars:

- *Early Childhood and Assistive Technology*
- *Families Are Important*
- *Five Tips for Parents of Young Children: Encouraging Positive Behavior*
- *Making the Move From Early Childhood Special Education to Kindergarten*
- *Parents as Team Members: How to Communicate Effectively with Early Childhood Professionals*
- *Everything You Need to Know Before your Child Turns Three*

Please be sure to fill out the evaluation form after viewing the webinar. Your feedback is helpful!

TAKE IT OUT FOR A TEST DRIVE AT PACER'S A.T. LENDING LIBRARY



For children and young adults with disabilities, discovering the right assistive technology (AT) can be life-changing. Thanks to the resources of the Lending Library at PACER's Simon Technology Center (STC), families and professionals can learn about the latest technology and take it home for a trial run. Lending library members can borrow as many as six items at a time for as long as four weeks.

"We have about 2,700 different pieces of disability-specific software and AT devices," said STC Director Bridget Gilormini. "The key is finding what works for an individual, and having them use it in their own environment."

An online catalog — AT Finder — enables members to search items available for loan. Categories include software for reading, writing, math, independent living skills, apps, and more. AT devices include touch screens, switches, alternative keyboards, and communications devices.

The library has a wide range of mobile AT apps, and members can borrow an iPad to try these applications at home including AudioNote, which Augsburg College student Sam Graves uses to record lectures. "It has been extremely useful to me since it takes me a while to write," said Graves, who has cerebral palsy. "I have been coming to the STC since I was 3 years old and have had great experiences there."

The STC has recently added some exciting new technology, including the VGo Robot, the UbiDuo Wireless Face-to-Face Communicator, and the Tobii Eye Mobile, state-of-the-art devices that can dramatically improve the quality of life for individuals with a broad range of disabilities.

Lending library members are encouraged to provide feedback and submit reviews. "Because of the library I bought a Livescribe smart pen and was able to access the Co:Writer app. What a wonderful resource!" one parent wrote. A professional who uses the lending library said, "I appreciate the efficiency of the loan and the availability of the devices. My client loved the new features (of the device) and Medicare covered the cost!"

Memberships are just \$50 per year for parents in Minnesota and \$100 annually for professionals and schools. Special events, such as the upcoming 'Appy Hour series and the annual Family Fun Day and Tech Expo, offer the opportunity to visit the lending library, try out new assistive technology, and learn about membership. For more information, visit PACER.org/stc or call (952) 838-9000.

Join Us For 'Appy Hour July 26

Now that you have an iPad or other mobile device, how do you know what apps to use? Join us for 'Appy Hour and discover how to identify the best AT apps available.

Saturday, July 26

11 a.m. to 1 p.m.

at PACER Center

For more information, e-mail tina.hanson@pacer.org

Family Fun Day & Tech Expo Oct. 11

Don't miss the chance to touch, see, and try a variety of AT to support play, learning, working, and more. Explore the possibilities and have free family fun at the same time.

Saturday, October 11

10 a.m. to 2 p.m.

at PACER Center

Pre-registration required at PACER.org/workshops

HELP YOUR YOUNG CHILD GROW AND LEARN WITH THESE RESOURCES



These resources can provide you with information and support to help your child grow in important ways — and in the three outcome areas outlined by the U.S. Department of Education: building positive social relationships, acquiring and using knowledge and skills, and taking action to meet their needs. For more information on early childhood resources, call PACER at (952) 838-9000 and ask to speak with a parent advocate.

TACSEI Families Community | challengingbehavior.org/communities/families.htm

The Technical Assistance Center on Social Emotional Intervention (TACSEI) offers information and select resources that have been compiled specifically with the needs of families in mind. Just as a community changes and grows over time, this website evolves as new interactive elements and resources are created and added.

Help Me Grow | helpmegrowmn.org

Some young children need extra help to learn and grow. “Help Me Grow,” an interagency initiative of the State of Minnesota, provides resources for families to look at developmental milestones, learn if there are concerns, and take the lead in seeking additional support or in referring their child for a comprehensive, confidential

screening or evaluation. Eligible Minnesota children, ages birth to 5, can receive services in their home, child care setting, or school, and services are free regardless of income or immigration status.

EZ AT 2 iBooks Edition | www.pacer.org/publications/stc.asp

PACER’s popular “EZ AT 2” book is now available in an iBooks edition. Complete with video, picture examples, an interactive glossary, and the full support of iPad’s built-in accessibility features, “EZ AT 2” brings creative ideas to life to help children ages birth to 3 with disabilities use assistive technology (AT) to participate more fully in daily routines and activities. Designed for newer generation iPads, the “EZ AT 2” iBooks edition can be downloaded free at the iTunes store.

A Family Guide to Participating in the Child Outcomes Measurement Process

The Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) has developed three child outcomes to measure the progress of young children. These outcomes are described in this helpful guide, which also includes tips for parents on what information to share with their child’s early intervention providers or early childhood special education teachers. The guide is available for free download at <http://www.pacer.org/publications/pdfs/ALL-71.pdf>, and printed copies can also be ordered for \$1.50 each with discounts for larger quantities. Call (952) 838-9000 or (800) 537-2237 and order item ALL-71.

PACER Center | PACER.org/ec

PACER’s Early Childhood Family Information and Resources Project offers individual assistance, workshops, and print- and web-based resources for families of children ages birth to 5. The project webpage has numerous resources, publications, and links to organizations and programs that serve families of young children with disabilities, both in Minnesota and nationwide.

For more information on early childhood resources, call PACER at (952) 838-9000 and ask to speak with a parent advocate.

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(Alternate format is available upon request.)



**CELEBRATE
YOUR CHILD
ON PACER'S
WALL OF
CHAMPIONS!**

Celebrate your young champions (birth to age 5) by submitting their photos to PACER's "Wall of Champions" on PACER's Facebook page. The photos will be posted with first names only. E-mail photos to Judy Swett, Early Childhood Coordinator, at jswett@PACER.org.