



Explore Assistive Technology and Open New Doors for Your Child

Ana's grandmother Katie knew that Ana's autism made it hard for her to speak, but she also knew that the 5-year-old had more to say than the words and sounds she could currently make. Katie's intuition led her to contact PACER Center where she learned how assistive technology could help Ana "speak" her thoughts through a communication device. Curious to learn more, Katie borrowed several communication devices from PACER's Simon Technology Center lending library and taught Ana how to use them. Ana quickly caught on and was soon able to "speak" three-word sentences on the device, opening new doors for expressing her wants, feelings, and needs. Assistive technology (AT) benefits children with any disability, and can be used by children of any age, including infants and toddlers. Here are some tips to help you explore assistive technology that could open new doors for your child.



1. Talk to professionals with assistive technology knowledge

A simple discussion with a knowledgeable professional can provide you with the general information and motivation you need to start exploring AT for your child. If your child has an Individual Family Service Plan (IFSP) or Individualized Education Program (IEP), discussing the need for assistive technology is a required part of the process when these are being developed. Schools and providers employ various professionals who likely have assistive technology knowledge, and you can discuss your child's AT needs with them.

- If your child is age 2 or under and has an IFSP, talk with your service coordinator about assistive technology for your child. Under Part C of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), service coordination is required to help your

family identify and obtain resources and services to meet your child's needs. Talk with your primary service provider if you are unsure who your service coordinator is.

- If your child is 3 or older and has an IEP, you should discuss the need for assistive technology during an IEP meeting. Your IEP team can suggest how AT could help, and discuss examples of potentially beneficial technology.
- Special education teachers, Occupational Therapists (OT's), Physical Therapists (PT's) and Speech-Language Pathologists (SLP's) are professionals who likely have some assistive technology knowledge. Each tends to have different areas of AT knowledge.
 - Special education teachers often know of AT that assists with the academic and behavioral skills their students are working on.
 - Occupational therapists usually know about AT to help a child with fine motor and physical tasks, such as handwriting, eating, and playing, as well as sensory needs.

- Physical therapists typically know of AT to help with mobility, seating and positioning, and other gross motor skills.
- Speech Language Pathologists typically know about assistive technologies that help children with communication, speech, and language needs.
- Some school districts or providers employ assistive technology specialists who work with families and professionals. Searching your school or provider’s website, or asking any of the staff mentioned above, can help you identify the right person to work with your family.

2. Ask the right questions

The process of finding the right assistive technology for your child is explained in TIKES materials that cover the Child-Centered AT Plan. Visit PACER.org/stc/tikes for more information on this process. Here are some general tips for discussing assistive technology with professionals:

- Make sure you are not intimidated if you are new to assistive technology or technology in general. As a parent, you know about the most important topic — your child’s needs. Let the professionals know you are new to AT and ask for more information about technology to help your child.
- Make sure you have thoroughly explained your child’s strengths and challenges before discussing specific AT products that might help your child. Concentrating on your child’s needs provides professionals with the information they need to identify the right technology to meet those needs.

3. Try different types of AT

Your child will receive the most benefit from assistive technology if it can be used in multiple settings such as at home, in the community, and at school. Many schools, care settings, and disability organizations have assistive technology lending libraries or loan programs which allow you to try AT products at home for a limited time to determine if they benefit your child. Using these resources gives you access to a wide variety of AT and first-hand experience of the impact it can make in your child’s life.

It also saves valuable resources by identifying the right technology to purchase and include in a child’s plan. Here are some ways you can find and use these resources:

- Every state has a dedicated assistive technology program which can direct you to resources such as AT lending libraries. The Association of Assistive Technology Act Programs (ATAP) website maintains a directory of these organizations, searchable by state at atap.org/states.html.
- Ask at your child’s school or care setting if they operate an assistive technology lending library. If one isn’t available in the school, there may be one elsewhere in the school district that you can use. Tips on what to observe and note during an AT trial are available in the TIKES tip sheet, “How to Try Assistive Technology.”
- Discuss with your IFSP team what assistive technology your child might benefit from and how it could be used at home or daycare. If your child attends an early childhood program through your local school district, ask about what technology they are using. To discover and incorporate additional assistive technologies in the IFSP, follow the process outlined in the TIKES’ Child-Centered AT Plan at PACER.org/stc/tikes.
- Discuss with your IEP team what assistive technology your child is currently using at school and how you can also use this technology at home. To discover and incorporate additional assistive technology in the IEP, follow the process outlined in the TIKES Child-Centered AT Plan. Any assistive technology written into your child’s plan must be provided by the school. However, AT purchased through the school belongs to the school and may not be available for use at home.

Opening new doors for your child with assistive technology is a rewarding process for both you and your child. Keeping a positive attitude, and following the steps outlined here, will set you on the right course to find the best fit for your child’s needs.