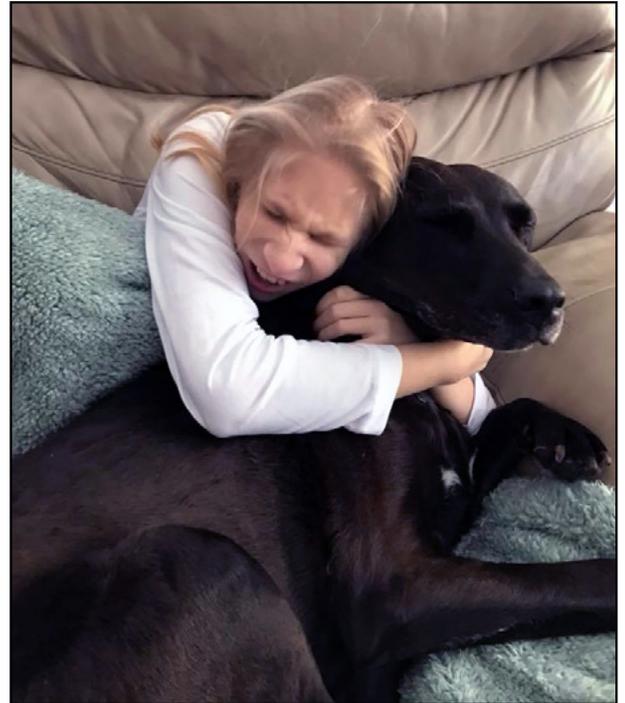




Using Social Media to Fund Assistive Technology

Ruby's success story

Ruby is a young girl with a rare genetic condition called Stromme Syndrome. Angie, Ruby's mother, shares disability awareness through social media channels such as Facebook and Instagram. Through pictures and videos, Angie tells a story of love and inclusion around her sweet daughter Ruby. One of those short videos, which features Ruby answering questions from their Instagram followers, went viral with more than a half million views. Capitalizing on this special occasion, Angie launched a GoFundMe campaign to raise the money needed for a specialized guide dog for Ruby. Angie wrote her story, illustrated with pictures, and shared it with her network of family and friends. In just three short days this campaign raised \$15,000 towards the purchase and training of a guide dog for Ruby.



Ruby hugs her dog, Stella.

Introduction

The question in Ruby's story, how to pay for assistive technology (AT), is one of the issues most frequently asked about AT. Schools are required by law to fund assistive technology identified as a need in the Individual Family Service Plan (IFSP) or Individualized Education Program (IEP). The IFSP or IEP team, including educators and parents, meet at least annually to consider the AT needs of the child. Through this process of consideration, AT is identified, tried, and, if found to meet the needs of the child, is written into the IFSP or IEP. More information about this process can be found in the TIKES handout titled "Conversations About Including Assistive Technology: Tips for Parents and Professionals" [PACER.org/stc/tikes/including-at-in-school.asp](https://pacer.org/stc/tikes/including-at-in-school.asp).

There are situations when assistive technology has not been identified as a need, but it would be a good thing to have. When this AT is not funded by the school district, families may want to check available funding from local resources, such as county waiver programs, private insurance, or Medicaid.

Sometimes a family wants or needs to purchase technology and they have exhausted their resources or cannot afford the technology. Then, an option to explore is "crowdfunding."

Crowdfunding is a new trend comprised of various online tools. It leverages an individual's social and other networks of family and friends to raise the funds needed to purchase something, including assistive technology. These tools include sites such as GoFundMe at gofundme.com.

How they work

These online tools work in similar ways. Here's how to get started:

- Create an account and follow the site instructions to set up your account

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- Tell your story using words, pictures, and videos
 - Set a financial goal and invite family and friends to contribute to the campaign
 - Share it on your social networks such as Facebook, Twitter, Pinterest, websites, blogs, and through email

Family and friends make online donations via credit card, debit card, or PayPal. Crowdfunding sites will collect a percentage of funds raised plus a transaction fee (usually comprised of a percentage and a fee per transaction). GoFundMe recently started asking donors to make a donation to cover the fees needed to maintain the site in lieu of charging the person trying to raise money.

Tips for creating a successful campaign

Tell a compelling ‘why’ story

The goal of setting up a fundraising campaign is to tell your story and motivate people to contribute to your cause. To do this, you will need a compelling story. Make it personal. Introduce your family and friends to your child and tell them your favorite things about him or her. She is funny and likes to tell jokes. He loves superheroes and is the playful one in the family. Tell everyone how your child will benefit from the technology and why your son or daughter needs it. Differentiate between it being just a nice thing to have and technology that will make a profound difference in his or her life. If you’ve had a chance to try the technology with your child, talk about how the technology made a difference. Using pictures and short videos will help family and friends connect with your child.

Share with your network of family and friends

When it comes time to share your campaign, do so with your personal network. Your family and friends are more likely to feel a connection to your story than simply sharing your campaign with the world. Sometimes when networks share stories, people who do not know you may be compelled to make a donation, but most of the donations will come from your personal connections.

Leverage special occasions

Time your campaign to coincide with natural excitement or engagement with your family and friends, such as near your child’s birthday or during holiday times. Consider “awareness” months that tie in with your child’s needs, such as launching a campaign for a communication (AAC) app or device during Autism Awareness Month (April) or during Augmentative and Alternative Communication Awareness Month (October).

Keep your network updated

Anyone following your campaign will be able to see your progress towards your goal. Posting updates keeps your story active in your networks and keeps people connected to your story. If you successfully raise the funds for the needed technology, share this success story. Tell them how they had a part in helping your son or daughter, and how the assistive technology has made a difference in his or her life. Thank people for their help. Let them know that every contribution, large or small, made a difference.

From small to great needs, crowdfunding is just one alternative strategy that can help children get necessary assistive technology. Ruby’s story is pretty spectacular, and it is likely to take a bit longer than three days. Sometimes not all of the funds are raised but enough that a family is more comfortable supplementing the remaining cost. Either way, when you’ve exhausted your resources and you don’t see a way, consider a crowdfunding campaign. For other strategies to get needed assistive technology, see PACER’s companion handout on assistive technology reuse and long-term loan programs.

It is recommended that individuals consult with an accountant or tax professional to plan for any tax implications for funds raised through crowdfunding. Additionally, an accountant may advise towards putting crowdfunded monies in a trust as to not impact other funding sources that families often use for children with disabilities.