Assistive Technology for a Student with an IEP: A Lot to Learn

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Editor's Note:

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It can be as simple as a pencil grip or as elaborate as a computerized speech synthesizer; as basic as VEL-CRO closures instead of buttons; or as technical as a robotic device used to turn pages; yet, all of these items fall under the umbrella of equipment know as assistive technology (AT).

Although large in scope, assistive technology is fairly easy to define: any piece of equipment that increases, maintains or improves functional capabilities of individuals with disabilities. There is a wide range of technology for addressing areas such as learning, communication, mobility, and peer and social interaction. AT also includes AT services such as assessment, training, and maintenance or repair. In short, assistive technology makes life easier for people with disabilities.

Sounds great, right? But as with most areas involving children with special needs, parents are often left with numerous questions. What types of AT would be best suited for a particular child? Who makes the decision to get AT and how is it paid for? What is involved in an AT assessment? This article attempts to answer some of these basics as well as a few others because, well, when it comes to AT, parents of children with disabilities need to know a lot.

What Works Best?

The need for AT must be considered on an individual case-by-case basis. Each child's needs are unique, based not only on type of disability but also on the impact of the disability on specific areas such as learning. One student may have problems only in the physical task of getting words legibly written on a paper. In this case, one or a combination of a few simple forms of AT—a 'fat' pen or pencil grip, raised line or adapted paper, a fastening device to secure paper to a writing surface or possibly a slantboard may be all that is needed.

Another student who has difficulty with written communication may have little or no problem with the physical act of writing but may have difficulty with spelling, grammar, organization, notetaking and other skills that could challenge and frustrate even the most dedicated student. Fortunately, the use of a word processor with programs such as spell checker, grammar check-er, speech recognition, outlining, and word prediction can be very effective in helping students with many kinds of disabilities improve their written communication.

If parents have concerns about the progress their son or daughter is making toward meeting his or her Individualized Education Program (IEP) goals and think he or she may be in need of AT, it's important to discuss these concerns with the child's therapists and/or teachers. Parents should make a written request to the principal or IEP chairperson asking for an AT assessment to be performed by the school.

What to Expect from Your Child's Assessment

A thorough AT assessment will address many aspects of recommended AT: cost, durability, expandability, portability, the setting in which the equipment will be used, ease of operation, maintenance, etc. A school AT assessment is typically performed by a professional such as a speech-language pathologist (SLP) or occupational therapist (OT) and/or an SLP, depending upon which services the student may already be receiving and/or the areas of concern.

If the results of the school's assessment show that a student must have the use of AT in order to achieve his or her IEP goals and objectives, the school system must pay for and provide the AT (including equipment and services).

If the school refuses to provide an AT assessment, you may want to consider arranging for a private AT assessment for your child; the IEP team is obligated to consider the results of any private evaluation. If the school refuses to conduct an AT assessment, but the IEP team agrees with private assessment results indicating the need for AT to meet IEP goals, the school would be required to pay for the private assessment. In additon, if the school provides an AT assessment, but you disagree with the results, you may also want to consider a private AT assessment. If the results of the private AT assessment are significantly different than those of the school's assessment, and the IEP team agrees with those results, the school must pay for the cost of the private assessment.

Keep in mind that details about the need for and types of AT to be provided must be thoroughly documented in the IEP.

Where to Find Help

There is so much to learn about AT. How can parents and professionals become knowledgeable about and keep up with the constantly changing AT available? There are many AT resources such as books, articles and websites and there are a number of organizations that specialize in AT (see AT resources on p.93). You may also be able to find information about AT through disability organizations and agencies, advocates, local hospitals, vocational and rehabilitation centers, support groups, and even computer user groups. In addition, parents may find that family members, relatives and friends, as well as their child's therapist and/or teachers are a good potential source of information and assistance—a sort of AT support network—not only for the student who uses AT, but for his or her family as well. ∎