

Assistive Technology Resources for Students with Mild Disabilities

By Dave L. Edyburn, PhD

The use of technology in special education has evolved considerably in recent years. However, information about assistive technology for students with mild disabilities, such as learning disabilities, mental retardation and emotional/behavioral disorders, continues to be relatively difficult to locate.

Language in the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act Amendments of 1997 (IDEA '97) requires that assistive technology be considered when planning the individualized educational program (IEP) of all students with disabilities. As a result, the 1997 reauthorization of IDEA serves as a marker event defining a new era relative to mild disabilities and assistive technology. (Note: the 2003 reauthorization of IDEA does not change this mandate.)

The purpose of this article is to highlight resources that parents can access to learn more about relevant assistive technology applications for children with mild disabilities.

Learning About Assistive Technology

Parents and classroom teachers often recognize the struggles and difficulties a child has in her academic classes but are uncertain whether or not there are technological tools available to help the child become more successful. Indeed, the lack of awareness about the possibilities afforded by appropriate assistive technology remains a fundamental problem undermining the requirement to consider assistive technology during the IEP process.

Action Planning

The potential of assistive technology should be explored whenever a child repeatedly is unsuccessful with an essential task. Inadequate attention has been devoted to understanding how technology can be used to enhance academic, behavioral and social functioning. As a result, it may require considerable persistence to obtain appropriate assistive technology devices and services for students with mild disabilities.

1. Contact your child's teacher and request that an assistive technology Evaluation be conducted to identify appropriate assistive technology devices and services that will support your child in the problematic academic areas list on the IEP. An assistive technology evaluation will be conducted by the school without charge to the family. If assistive technology appears that will be helpful, it should be implemented as soon as possible and written into the IEP.
2. Learn more about assistive technology. Register at the Assistive Technology Training Online (ATTO) Project at <http://atto.buffalo.edu> and participate in free, web-based training at your own pace and from the comfort of your home. These materials are extremely well-designed and will contribute to your ability to advocate on behalf of your child.

3. A critical question that continues to stump parents and professionals alike involves the decision when to recognize the failure of instruction to help a child learn necessary information (i.e., basic math facts) and when assistive technology (i.e., a calculator) should be introduced. Read the article “ Remediation vs. Compensation: A Critical Decision Point in Assistive Technology Consideration,” (<http://www.connsensebulletin.com/edyburn4n3.html>) and discuss the concepts with your child and your child’s teacher. Attempt to reach consensus on how critical it is to “know” or “do” a task independently, and whether or not it is desirable to achieve functional performance through the use of assistive technology. In addition, what percentage of time will be devoted to using assistive technology and what percentage of time will be devoted to instruction and remediation to develop the skills?

4. Explore web sites like the Georgia Tools for Life (<http://www.gatfl.org>) and the Closing the Gap Resource Guide (<http://www.closingthegap.com>) to identify potentially useful assistive technologies that can enhance performance across the life span.

5. Assemble a collection of hardware, software and web-based tools (i.e., a toolkit) to support your child’s performance. For example, if he has difficulty planning a writing assignment, consider Kidspiration or Inspiration (<http://www.inspiration.com>). Or, if keyboarding and spelling are difficult, consider a specialized word processor that features word prediction like Co: Writer (<http://www.donjohnston.com>) or WordQ (<http://www.wordq.com>). Difficulties reading may suggest the need for text-to-speech tools like CAST eReader (<http://www.cast.org>) or ReadPlease (<http://www.readplease.com>). Difficulties with math computations and math concepts may suggest the need for software tools like MathPad and IntelliMathics (<http://www.intellitools.com>).

6. Collect data about your child’s performance before using assistive technology (commonly known as “pre”) as well as after he has had the opportunity to learn how to use it (commonly known as “post”). You may describe the pre and post differences anecdotally (i.e., he likes to complete the task) or you may find measurable differences (i.e., homework time is cut in half, written assignments are three times longer, etc.). Watch for evidence that the assistive technology is working, or not. Share this information with your child’s teacher and the IEP team and discuss additional strategies for enhancing academic, behavioral and social performance.

Web sites that support the use of assistive technology by students with mild disabilities

- ✓ Capturing the Potential: <http://www.uwn.edu/~edyburn/ctp.html>
- ✓ Customizing Technology Solutions for College Students with LD: http://www.ldonline.org/ld_indepth/technology/customizing_technology.html
- ✓ LD Resources: <http://www.ldresources.com/>
- ✓ Tools for Living with Learning Disabilities: http://www.ldonline.org/ld_indepth/technology/celd_assistive_technology.html

Reference

Edyburn, D.L. (2000). "Assistive Technology and Students with Mild Disabilities." Focus on Exceptional Children, 32(6), 1-24. *Dr. Edyburn teaches in the areas of mild disabilities related to learning and behavior at the University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee. He is the author of The Electronic Scholar: Using Technology to Enhance Research Productivity.*

The purpose of this article is to provide information about technologies, strategies and techniques for implanting any number of assistive technology devices, as well as information about how to incorporate assistive technology devices and services within Individualized Education Plans (IEPs). We encourage you to send suggestions or questions to epedit@aol.com.