Family Engagement Newsletter

Parent and School Collaboration Through Use of Assistive Technology

By Wendy Overturf

Under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004 (IDEA), all local educational agencies (LEAs) are expected to provide assistive technology (AT) to students who need it in order to receive a free appropriate public education (FAPE). The range of assistive technology is wide, and could take the form of a simple tilted surface to ease handwriting, to a sophisticated communication device to help a nonverbal child communicate.

Typically, an IEP team discusses the need for assistive technology. Many times, it may involve an evaluation for assistive technology. If it is determined the child has a need for an assistive technology device in order to receive FAPE, it is the responsibility of the district to provide that device. In the case of Sarah, the process was a bit different. Sarah is a 6-year-old, non-verbal child with cerebral palsy. Through the efforts of her parents, Sarah received a communication device from an outside funding source. This device had the potential to allow Sarah to “communicate” at school with her teachers and with her peers. Through the company that distributed the device, Sarah’s parents received extensive training on how to program the device and modify the “output” so that it was appropriate to Sarah’s different environments and needs.

At the IEP team meeting, the team determined that this was an appropriate device for Sarah. The teacher was excited that Sarah was now able to share news from home and that the device was assisting her in making some of her needs known at school. Almost every night, Sarah’s parents would program a message or some type of communication into the device so that Sarah could share it the next day in school.

After several weeks of using the device, Sarah’s parents were becoming frustrated. Although they programmed communication for the school into the device, it was only on days that Sarah had speech and language services that there was two-way communication using the device. The parents wanted to be engaged in Sarah’s education and wanted Sarah to be able to “tell” them what had happened in school on a daily basis. The parents shared their concerns with the special education teacher and requested an IEP review. The parents were knowledgeable that there was a section in the IEP document that called for “program modifications or supports for school personnel” to enable the child to “[i] To advance appropriately toward attaining the annual goals;...” Parents therefore requested that school staff that interacted with Sarah on a routine basis be given training on how to properly utilize and program her communication device.

Because of this advocacy, that training was written into the IEP. Sarah’s parents felt that this was a great starting point for them to engage more fully in Sarah’s education and for Sarah to meet her IEP goals.

It should also be noted that there is another section in the IEP document that provides for parent training. While not applicable in this case, had the parents needed training on the device, this should be considered at the IEP team meeting.
Statewide Events

Wisconsin DPI Autism Trainings:
Autism Essentials Across the School Day:
October 10-11, 2017
Teaching and Supporting New Behaviors:
November 28-29, 2017
Autism Essentials Across the School Day:
February 7-8, 2018
Addressing Autism in Early Childhood:
February 20-21, 2018
Teaching and Supporting New Behaviors:
March 7-8, 2018
Supporting Autistic Thinking Style
June 19-20, 2018

Youth in Partnership with Parents for Empowerment (YIPPE)
An opportunity for youth with disabilities and their parents to learn about the transition process in a unique way. They will hear from speakers and take part in hands-on activities in parallel programs over five weekends. The program assists youth ages 15-20, to: make decisions for themselves, increase independence, get involved in their school and community, make friends and have fun, become advocates, learn what the future could hold for them as they think about living on their own, college, work and health. YIPPE assists parents by: enhancing their leadership and communication skills, providing information in the areas of health, employment, education, inclusion, legislation and adult services.

Training locations, start dates & links:
Green Bay: Begins Oct. 20 & 21, 2017
WI Dells: Begins Oct. 6 & 7, 2017
Green Bay & WI Dells Information Link

Parents in Partnership (PIP)
This is a no cost event. PIP is a leadership development opportunity for parents of children with disabilities ages 6-14. Parents and other caregivers meet together five times during the year to share their family stories, challenges, joys, and triumphs of raising their children. PIP assists parents to: learn about valuable community and statewide resources, plan ahead for their child and family, enjoy time with other parents, learn more within the topics of; health care, education, policy making, inclusion and self-determination.

Training locations, start dates & links

At Home Learning Strategies

With our focus on assistive technology this month, we are sharing apps to help build literacy skills. All of the apps listed below are either free, have free mini-versions, or are under $5. Search for these apps to suit your specific device.

Bob Books Reading Magic is a program that builds with the skill level of the child.

Print Concepts focuses on foundational skills.

HearBuilder Phonological Awareness – helps children with phonological awareness and listening skills

Starfall Learn to Read - focuses on the sounds of letters, specifically vowels using music, video, mini-books and repetition.

Starfall ABCs – Focuses on the alphabet – how letters look, sound, and are used in words.

Elmo Loves ABCs – Teaches kids from infants on up how to read using interactive videos and games.

Sight Words Kids Reading Games & Flash Cards – Flash cards help children recognize common sight words to build fluency.

Endless Alphabet - Children learn increasingly difficult vocabulary words through games.

PlayTales - Storytelling app for a wide age range available in eight different languages.

Check out the National Library of Virtual Manipulatives for visual objects to help kids solve math problems in different ways. They are broken down by grade level and subject to help you find the right tool.

Geogebra is an online graphing tool and calculator where kids can type in an equation and see it graphed on the screen. Drawings can also be translated into equations.

WebMath offers problem solving and calculation tools for a variety of math subjects.

If you are looking for assistive technology to help support your child’s math learning in the home, check out this great resource from Understood.
Online Resources: Assistive Technology

Center for Parent Information and Resources (CPIR)
The website offers numerous resources related to assistive technology. It also has links to checklists that IEP teams can use when considering assistive technology.

Center on Technology and Disability
Assistive and instructional technology (AT/IT) allows children across the ability spectrum to participate fully at home, in school, and in the community. The Center on Technology and Disability provides a wealth of free resources — personal and professional development (PPD) webinars, articles, guides, training materials and more.

National Center on Accessible Educational Materials (AEM)
This site focuses on how schools can serve students who are unable to read or use standard print materials, through the use of specialized formats (braille, audio, large print, and digital text). There are articles and research about effective practices, technical information, tutorials, webinars, online forums, and more.

Bookshare
An online library of more than 170,000 digital books for children and adults with qualifying disabilities. Schools can download textbooks, books, and periodicals, which their students can access on computers or mobile devices using software or apps that read the text aloud. For students with visual impairments, schools can also download files for use with braille devices.

Learning Ally
Featuring a collection of more than 70,000 audiobooks, recorded textbooks and literature titles, for children and adults with qualifying disabilities. Audiobooks are available as digital downloads, as well as CDs, and free apps are available for popular mobile devices. Learning Ally works with volunteers to record books that its users request.

SETT Framework
Student, Environments, Tasks, and Tools—all of which need to be fully explored when assistive technology tools are considered or selected. The website offers a set of forms for collaborative decision making.

Tech Finder
This website has a search function that helps teachers and parents to find Apps that promote learning in specific subject areas. The website also has links to numerous other sites related to assistive technology to the child’s individual needs, abilities, and experience.

Free Assistive Tech Tools Make Learning Accessible to All
This website has a long list of tools and articles related to assistive technology. It also includes links to tools to support Universal Design for Learning (UDL). UDL is an educational framework based on research in the learning sciences, including cognitive neuroscience, that guides the development of flexible learning environments that can accommodate individual learning differences.

Reading Rockets
This link will introduce parents to the role of AT in helping their children with a learning disability. Parents will learn how to choose AT tools that are reliable and to select technology that is tailored to the child’s individual needs, abilities, and experience.
Instructional Trends

The Use of Technology to Increase Teacher-Family Communication

The I-4, IEP Linking Form, Section II, on the new Wisconsin IEP form prompt asks: “How will school staff engage parents/families in the education of the student (e.g., sharing resources, communicating with parents/families, building upon family strengths, connecting parents/families to learning activities, etc.)? The use of technology is just one of many methods that can increase family engagement.

According to Meghan Bogardus Cortez, Associate Editor at EdTech: Focus on K–12, “Smartphones can help deepen and extend relationships beyond the scheduled parent-teacher conferences.” She suggests four apps that provide safe messaging options and communication tools to create a stronger relationship between teachers and parents. The following apps were highlighted in her article: “4 Apps to Foster Parent-Teacher Communication.”

Bloomz
With the feel of a social networking site, Bloomz has teachers invite parents to join the class group. Once there, parents have access to class schedules, photo albums, private messaging with teachers and other parents, and interactive sign-up sheets.

SimplyCircle
Though very similar to Bloomz, SimplyCircle can also be used by PTA and PTO organizations and other parent groups.

ClassDojo
This app, perfect for younger students, enables children to regularly share picture messages and achievements with their parents. With similar photo sharing and messaging, the app lets teachers report, long before the parent-teacher conference, the skills their students are excelling at and the areas they need to work on.

Remind
Teachers can use Remind to send schedule reminders, homework updates or even encouragement. The biggest difference with Remind is the flexibility of messaging. Communication can be done in app or through a simple SMS to a parent who doesn’t have the app.

Research to Read

Disruptive Innovation—Integrating an Assistive Technology Curriculum into Teacher Preparation In a Rural Institution
King, Laura H., Jennifer B. Williams, and Lora Lee Smith Canter. City Meets Country: Educators Working to Solve the Challenges of Special Education 60 (2017): 18. Article link
ABSTRACT:
A teacher preparation program that explicitly embeds assistive technology (AT) into its candidates’ program of study will produce future teachers with a stronger foundation and better command of AT in the classroom. This program description outlines a model which addresses AT curriculum (covering AT awareness, knowledge, and skills) through a series of integrated professional development (PD) sessions embedded in course offerings in a special education program of study. Specifically this program description addresses the following: (a) the process of integrating AT curriculum into a program of study; (b) a description of the program’s design to ensure equity of access between on-campus and distance education courses; (c) an overview of the current PD sessions; and (d) challenges and solutions.
Contributions to the Newsletter

Upcoming newsletter topics: October: Learning Disabilities  
November: Emotional Behavioral Disabilities  
December: Communication

To submit contributions, you may use either the attached word document for contributing articles, events, or resources. Send submissions to woverturf@wifacets.org. If unable to access form, send your message in an email.

Material appropriate for the monthly newsletter include web links to sources of family involvement/parent leadership resources, advertisements for statewide trainings for parents, youth or parent/educator audiences, information about statewide parent agencies, recent research pertaining to family engagement, and family engagement success articles.

This monthly update is provided by the Wisconsin Family Assistance Center for Education, Training & Support (WI FACETS) to share statewide information regarding parent leadership and family involvement. If you would like to receive this monthly update or if you would like to have your name removed from the distribution list, please click here or contact: Wendy Overturf at woverturf@wifacets.org.