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Assistive Technology and Transition Planning

By **Thomas J. Nurse**

These are exciting times in which we live. The opportunities to use assistive technology as a tool to support the activities of youth and adults with disabilities have never been better. When assistive technology is combined with transition planning, the scope of opportunities for achieving life goals broadens greatly.

Assistive technology refers to “any item, piece of equipment, or product system that is used to increase, maintain, or improve functioning of individuals with disabilities”; it can be as simple as a pencil grip or complex as a touch-screen computer (Family Center on Technology and Disability, 2006a). This brief article offers some ideas, resources, and things to consider related to assistive technology and transition. This is a topic of particular passion for me as a parent of a wonderful 14-year-old daughter, Shelby, who has cerebral palsy and utilizes assistive technology every day. Shelby’s assistive technology success story was recently highlighted in an article posted on the Family Center for Technology and Disability Web site (www.fctd.info/).

Start Early, But it’s Never Too Late

As a child learns new skills, those skills build the foundation for acquiring related higher-level skills. For a child with a disability, development may be slower, requiring more time, more repetition and a willingness to learn other ways to be successful, including utilizing assistive technology. For example being able to answer a yes-or-no question is the start to being able to engage in conversation, yet if a disability creates a barrier to communication then assistive technology may be a valuable tool to help make communication possible.

By law, a student’s assistive technology needs must be considered in development of their individualized education program (IEP); it may be referred to as “assistive technology” in some IEPs, while in others it may be “accommodations, supports, program modifications or supplementary aids and services” (Family Center on Technology and Disability, 2006b).

Under IDEA 2004, transition planning must start no later than the first IEP to be in effect when the child turns 16. However, in reality earlier is often better. IDEA 2004 also states that a Transition IEP broadens formally to “a results- oriented process, that is focused on improving the academic and functional achievement of the child with a disability to facilitate the child’s movement from school to post-school activities...” (National Dissemination Center for Children with Disabilities, 2005). Assistive technology needs should be included as part of the discussion to determine if a Transition IEP may be needed earlier than age 16, as well as included in the IEP itself.

Think Across Settings

Children and youth learn in all their environments, not just in school. Therefore, it’s critical to consider utilizing assistive technology in all the child’s environments including, home, school, and in the community. For example, independent living skills include tasks such as turning on lights, calling for assistance, changing the TV channel or talking on the phone. Typically these are more frequently part of home life, not the school day. However, often the expertise on how assistive technology could be utilized to develop these skills exists

with the school-based assistive technology professionals. Successfully combining assistive technology considerations in all the child's environments requires communication between the family and school, which allows everyone to share their perspectives and expertise.

Let's Get Started

The steps below do not always occur in the same order and sometimes you have to go back and try again. But, they provide a starting point for evaluating how assistive technology can benefit a child in school and beyond into adult life:

- Establish an understanding of the child's present level of academic performance by utilizing your state's standardized grade level student expectations to identify both areas of strength and where additional assistance may be needed.
- Establish an understanding of the child's present level of functional performance by utilizing a tool such as the *WATI Assistive Technology and Transition* forms (www.wati.org/products/freematerials.html).
- Develop a written vision of life after high school in a detailed post-school outcome statement. This statement can help the Transition IEP team identify needed supports and services.
- Consider whether assistive technology can help achieve the outcomes.
- Identify who's going to do what in acquiring the technology, providing training in its use if needed, and funding it. Also determine whether the funding source will allow the technology to go with the student into post-high school education and work.

Finally, as the old saying goes, "The harder you work, the luckier you'll get." Good luck.

References

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