

# Occupational OUTLOOKS

Two local occupational therapists discuss the **pros** — and **one big con** — of using technology to help kids on the autism spectrum succeed.

## iPad Upsides

By Anne M. Duncan, MEd, OTR/L

As a seasoned school-based occupational therapist, I am al-

ways searching for new ways to motivate and engage students. Technology helps them reach their optimal occupational performance in the educational and community arenas.

Working with an inquisitive young boy with autism who had no motivation for paper/pencil or tabletop tasks, I presented the Whiteboard iPad app. Before I knew it he was imitating basic prewriting shapes like it was magic. The iPad drew him

in and opened the door to the world of written communication.

A creative and inquiring 10-year-old struggled with written communication and was opposed to exploring speech-to-text software. One day he observed an older student successfully using such software and hesitantly gave it a try. After weeks of training he is now using the Dragon Naturally Speaking app in language arts to express his creative thoughts with a more positive attitude. Technology helped to decrease frustration and increase his self-expression, independence and productivity.

It is common for children on the autism spectrum to have trouble navigating the social arena. Current evidence-based practice supports the need for rehearsal, repetition and role-modeling to facilitate social skill development. With that in mind, we discussed in class social skill components (personal space, voice volume, showing interest) and took pictures and videos on the iPad as we role-played. The students were highly motivated to see their pictures and enjoyed making a book depicting right and wrong ways to respond in social situations.

Lastly, I work with a high schooler who was demonstrating good progress toward his pre-employability skills, but he was extremely anxious of taking the next step to off-campus vocational work. After the reluctant teen reviewed videos of other students working at numerous off-campus sites, he gained confidence that he did indeed have the skills to springboard to a more challenging vocational setting.

Students are naturally drawn to technology, so when possible we should use it as a tool that enhances their ability to access their learning environment and as an adjunct to independence. **mk**



## Striking the Balance

By Nancy Allard, MA, OTR/L

Play is considered a universal occupation of children and the means to how they learn.

What, where, how and who kids play with has changed significantly in the last 10 years. The average daily time children spend on “screen time” has risen dramatically, while the average time kids are engaged in physical play has dropped off just as significantly.

We can all agree that technology has forever changed our world and wonder, “What did we do without this?” However, for young children — especially those on the autism spectrum — the development of early cognitive, motor, sensory, visual and social skills is dependent on interaction with objects, our environment and each other. Furthermore, hands-on physical interaction is vitally important to the overall development of self-regulation and social interaction, areas in which kids with autism struggle.

Many of these skills cannot be learned through screen time, although once developed they can be supported. We know that many of the people who developed the awesome technologies available to us daily most likely spent many hours playing, building, taking apart, making choices and mistakes, negotiating and problem-solving with other people.

Striking a balance between our interaction with the 2D world of screen time and the 3D world in which we live is the challenge we face for our children. We must work to find that delicate balance between active learning and the use of technologies that enhance and support skills so important for the next generation, including self-regulation, initiation, prioritizing, problem solving, task completion and social competency skills. **mk**



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The Vanguard School and the Luma Center are programs of Valley Forge Educational Services (VFES.net) in Malvern, PA, which prepares children and young adults with special needs to realize their potential. VFES provides school-year and summer programs as well as transition skills programming and clinical consultation services.