

Assistive Technology (AT) For Individuals with Learning Disabilities

This fact sheet is intended to be a general guide to parents on the assistive technology available for students with learning disabilities..

General Facts about Assistive Technology

Individuals with learning disabilities often have difficulty with tasks that others take for granted – like reading, listening, organizing information, or writing – and may benefit from the use of assistive technology (AT) in order to increase their daily independence.

Appropriate assistive technology for students and adults with learning disabilities can include but is not limited to:

- computers with adaptive software
- books on tape, or electronic format
- speller and grammar checkers
- specialized four-track tape recorders
- audio players
- computer screen readers
- talking word processors and calculators
- electronic data organizers

Assistive technology may be considered: 1) High-tech, which usually costs more, requires training, and equipment and software such as voice recognition or word prediction software, or 2) Low-tech, which usually costs less than high-tech and requires only limited training and inexpensive equipment such as a talking watch, pencil grippers, highlighting marker tape, and ear plugs to reduce distraction.

Assistive technology can be used to accommodate and/or modify specific tasks, or be incorporated into performing tasks. Assistive technology providers (i.e. rehabilitation engineers, certified assistive technology professionals) evaluate formally and in some cases informally the functional limitation of the disability to match the appropriate assistive technology.

Definitions

With this in mind, the re-authorized Assistive Technology Act (The Tech Act) of 1998 defines an assistive technology device as any item, piece of equipment, product or system, whether acquired commercially, modified, or customized, that is used to increase, maintain, or improve functional capabilities of individuals with disabilities. (Authority: 29 U.S.C. 3002).

As defined in The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 1997 (IDEA 97) the term assistive technology device means “any item, piece of equipment, or product system, whether acquired commercially off the shelf, modified, or customized, that is used to increase, maintain, or improve the functional capabilities of a child with a disability.” 34 CFR 300.5 (Authority: 20 U.S. C. 1401 (1)). The term assistive technology service means “any service that directly assists a child with a disability in the selection, acquisition, or use of an assistive technology device.” 34 CFR 300.6 (Authority: 20 U.S.C. 1401 (2)).

Facts About Assistive Technology and The Individualized Education Program (IEP)

1. Assistive technology needs must be considered along with the child's other educational needs.
2. Needs for technology must be identified on an individual basis.
3. Identification of technology needs must involve family members and a multidisciplinary team.
4. Parents or IEP members can ask for additional evaluations or an independent evaluation to determine assistive technology needs.
5. When an evaluation is being conducted, consider fine-motor skills, communication, and alternatives to traditional learning approaches.
6. Lack of availability of equipment or cost alone cannot be used as an excuse for denying an assistive technology service.
7. If included in the IEP, assistive technology services and devices must be provided at no cost to the family and, if so indicated, devices must be allowed to go home with the student.
8. Parents always have the right to appeal if assistive technology services are denied.

The need for assistive technology must be considered like other needs, on a case-by-case basis. Assessments can also be requested through the IEP process. IEPs that include assistive technology should be written so that students have access to these accommodations not only for in-class work, but also for projects and all types of tests, including high-stakes assessment. To support the need for assistive technology, parents and professionals should document precisely how the student benefits educationally. For instance, documentation could include information such as: “Mary usually takes 1 hour to do 8 long division math problems. With a voice output (talking) calculator, she can do the same number of problems in 20 minutes.”

Facts About Assistive Technology and Employment

Individuals and employers can get help identifying appropriate assistive technology and/or accommodations in the workplace by contacting the Job Accommodations Network (JAN) at 1-800-526-7234 or at <http://janweb.icdi.wvu.edu/>.

JAN Consultants can provide comprehensive, up-to-date information about accommodations, devices and strategies. Calls to JAN are confidential. Information is provided about job accommodations, the Americans with Disabilities Act, and the employability of individuals with disabilities.

In addition, some companies have taken the lead in providing accessibility services. For example, Microsoft Corporation has developed a web site that features products and resources for assistive technology. For more information see www.microsoft.com/enable/default.aspx.

Nationwide Technical Assistive Projects

With the passage of the Assistive Technology Act of 1998 (Tech Act), the National Institute on Disability and Rehabilitation Research (NIDRR) is responsible for its implementation. The Tech Act provides grants to states to help bring about systems change to increase the availability of, access to, and funding for assistive technology.

NIDRR also helps states provide legal advocacy to individuals with disabilities concerning assistive technology issues. The most effective way to learn about your local Tech Act project is to go to The Rehabilitation Engineering and Assistive Technology Society of North America (RESNA) web site, <http://www.resna.org/> , which will offer contact information for state Technical Assistive Projects.

(This LDA Fact Sheet was revised in January, 2004.)