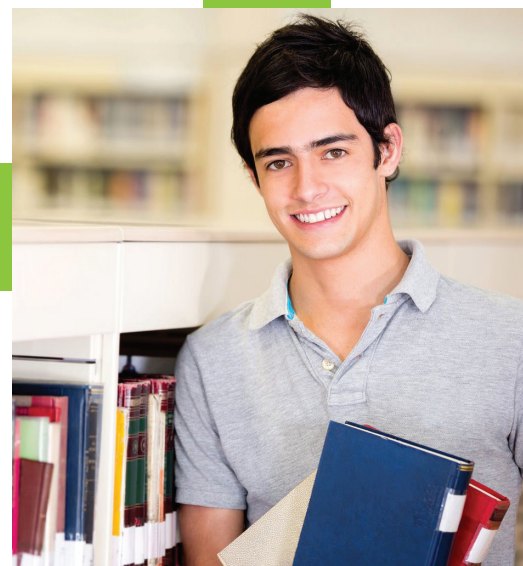# Getting Started: Exploring Assistive Technology (AT) With Your Teen or Young Adult

CTD Center on Technology and Disability

Assistive and Instructional Technology Supporting Learners with Disabilities

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CHAMPIONS FOR CHILDREN WITH DISABILITIES®

Assistive technology (AT) helps teens and young adults work and study in a more personalized way. Because each person's needs are different, finding the right AT often means your son or daughter will try different options before finding the right one. This process of discovering and experimenting with AT is often referred to as trying* assistive technology.

Trying assistive technology helps the school see how your teen will benefit from using a given tool. This guide will help you work with your teen and supporting professionals to discover which technologies work best. To identify how AT can assist with specific skill areas, consult the accompanying document, "Involving Your Teen and Young Adult in Selecting Assistive Technology."

Devin's Story

Devin, a ninth grader with many friends and interests, is excited to be starting high school. His family is excited too, but are also concerned about the longer and more complex writing assignments he'll be expected to complete. Devin's sensory processing disorder makes handwriting difficult, and he can be distracted while trying to take notes or organize his ideas.

During an Individualized Education Program (IEP) meeting, a team member suggested assistive technology might help Devin with his writing. His teachers agreed that it would be helpful, as Devin often struggles to keep up with note taking in class and doesn't write as much as he knows about a topic in longer written assignments.

Devin and his family met with the IEP team and discussed their interest in having Devin use online speech-to-text and audio recording technology. The team arranged a meeting with the school's AT specialist, and Devin and his family learned how to use the AT tools.

After Devin began to use the technology at home for book reports and other writing assignments, he decided that the technology would be useful for tests with essay questions and short answers. His teachers worked with the IEP team and agreed to experiment with the technology during some upcoming tests. Devin was allowed to use a spare laptop in a quiet room and speak his sentences aloud, while the software converted them to text.

Schools may use the terms "trialing," "trying," or "consideration of" when discussing this process of experimenting with AT.

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At the next IEP team meeting, Devin's parents asked his teachers about improvements to Devin's writing. They were happy to learn that Devin was providing much longer, more comprehensive answers when using the software. His teachers also noted an increase in Devin's participation in class now that note taking was less of a struggle. To ensure that Devin would have consistent access to the tools, his team wrote speech-to-text software and audio recording apps as technology that he needed in his IEP. Devin is now able to use this helpful technology in all of his classes today and in the future.

Incorporate AT into an IEP or 504 Plan and Discover Resources for Trying AT

Step 1: Help your son or daughter learn about the importance of AT and why it may help

- Let your teen know that their opinion and participation is the most important part of the process.

- Ask for your teen's opinion about assistive technology they have previously used. If they're new to AT, ask how they feel about trying it.

- Let your teen know that AT can make school and life easier, allowing them to utilize their skills in the way that works best. AT is often a part of, or looks just like, the technology used by others.

- Let your son or daughter know that the decision to use technology is theirs, but that it can be an exciting and positive experience for them.

- Help your teen understand self-advocacy, the ability to respectfully speak up for oneself and their needs. Explain that they will become their own advocate by helping to select the right AT for themselves. Example: "I would like to use a computer to complete this assignment as my learning disability makes it hard for me to write what I know with paper and pencil."

Let your teen know that while you're working with them to find the right AT, their opinion and participation is the most important part of the process.

Step 2: Inform your son's or daughter's IEP or 504 team that you and your teen are interested in exploring and trying assistive technology

- Ask that someone who's knowledgeable about assistive technology attend your teen's IEP meeting. According to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) assistive technology must be considered for all students with disabilities. AT should be discussed annually and matching technology to a student's needs is a team conversation.

- Specify in the IEP or 504 Plan which of your student's skills and tasks you would like assistive technology to address.

- Discuss with your IEP team what successful use of assistive technology would mean for a given skill or task. For example, if your teen is looking for software to assist with spelling, ask their teacher to estimate how often your teen misspells words in a typical assignment and what would be a significant improvement. Reaching consensus about what constitutes successful use of assistive technology helps ensure that AT is incorporated in the IEP.

- List the types of technology or the features you are interested in exploring. There is no need to list specific products. For example, writing "apps to assist with reading textbooks" is a good idea and helps you keep your options open.

- Decide with your IEP team who the point person will be for your teen's exploration of AT. Having a point person helps make sure that the AT is being used and progress is being made.

- Ask IEP team members what accommodations need to be made so that your son or daughter has an opportunity to try appropriate types of AT.

- Consider requesting an assistive technology assessment from your student's school or from an appropriate community agency. The request should be in writing. This is especially important if the results of your teen's trying AT are inconclusive. The AT specialist who completes the assessment can individualize recommendations for your student.

Step 3: Coordinate with your student's IEP point person to discover available assistive technology, including borrowing policies

- Schools may have assistive technology for your teen to try. If not, they may be able to access community AT loan programs to borrow assistive technology.

Ask that someone with knowledge about assistive technology attend your teen's IEP meeting.

- States may have community resources to connect you with assistive technology available for loan. Visit the Association of Assistive Technology Act Programs website for more information at **ataporg.org/programs**.

Explore Assistive Technology

Step 4: Gain knowledge of the AT tool being tried

- Learn the basics of a specific tool. Ask the specialists who are lending the tool to demonstrate it and provide available instructional materials. Ask questions so that you can be a resource for your teen and the school staff.

- Visit the manufacturer's website to view videos and download an instruction manual.

- Have the point person from your IEP team demonstrate the tool for you and your teen. This will make it easier to communicate about the tool and its impact.

Step 5: Create a plan for trying assistive technology supports

- Concentrate on a few pieces of technology at a time to determine their effectiveness.

- Ask your son or daughter which technology they are most excited to try first, and see if they have any ideas of when and where these tools would be most helpful. It is important for the teen to be involved in these decisions.

- Prioritize skills and tasks with your IEP team, and start with a tool that will first address your teen's greatest needs.

- Brainstorm with the IEP point person a "who, what, when, and where" plan for testing your son's or daughter's technology at school. Ask for suggestions about how a given tool might be used at school, and seek suggestions to have staff support your teen's use of a new tool. If appropriate, share this plan with your IEP point person or teachers.

Step 6: While trying AT, evaluate its impact

- Encourage your teen to keep an open mind when using new AT, and explain why new options are worthwhile.

- Make note of your son's or daughter's feedback about the AT. Ask for specific questions.

Ask questions about assistive technology so that you can be a resource for your teen and the school staff.

- Work with the IEP team to measure how an AT tool helps with a particular skill. Note differences in the quantity, quality and speed of your teen's work.

- Strategize about how to record and share important information when your teen tries assistive technology. Identify what types of information should be noted and shared. Examples include: How AT impacts the quantity and quality of your son's or daughter's work, their emotional or sensory issues, and how long it takes to complete a task. Consider a discussion with the IEP point person midway through the trial period.

Discuss Your Findings with Your IEP Point Person

Step 7: Share your observations, and listen to feedback from your IEP point person

- Discuss observations and data when your teen tries AT, including its usefulness.

- Examine what works. If the AT your teen tried did not meet his or her needs, brainstorm with your IEP point person about other types of tools or features that might benefit your teen.

- Agree on next steps for acquiring needed technology; determine whether the AT will be needed both at home and at school.

- Write the use of helpful AT into your teen's IEP. Include necessary support services.

- Consider asking to experiment more with the AT if you or the point person feel your teen hasn't had enough time with the technology.

- Keep in mind that one assistive technology tool may not provide all the support your son or daughter needs. Use the experience of trying assistive technology to explore with the IEP point person other ways your teen could benefit from AT.

Encourage your teen to keep an open mind when using new AT, and explain why new options are worthwhile.
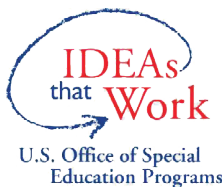
Resources

- Assistive Technology and the IEP - **http://ctdinstitute.org/sites/default/files/file_attachments/AT-IEP-English2_0.pdf**

- Student-Centered K-12 Assistive Technology Consideration Flow Chart - **PACER.org/stc/pubs/STC-35c.pdf**

- Association of Assistive Technology Act Programs (ATAP) state directory - **atconnects.com/at-act-programs/state-at-act-programs**

- 8 Places to Test Drive Assistive Technology - **www.understood.org/en/school-learning/assistive-technology/finding-an-assistive-technology/8-places-to-test-drive-assistive-technology**

Evidence

- Journal of Special Education Technology, September 2003 vol. 18 no. 4 7-19 "The Role of Technology in Preparing Youth with Disabilities for Postsecondary Education and Employment" By Sheryl Burgstahler (Washington University) **jst.sagepub.com/content/18/4/7.short**

- Career Development and Transition for Exceptional Individuals, May 2016 vol. 39 no. 2 99-110 "Promoting Self-Determination and Transition Planning Using Technology" By Van Laarhoven, Smith, Johnson, Olson. (Northern Illinois University). **cde.sagepub.com/content/39/2/99.abstract**

- Journal of Special Education Technology, March 2006 vol. 21 no. 2 47-64 "Assistive Technology for Individuals with Disabilities: A Review and Synthesis of the Literature" Alper, Raharinirina. (University of Northern Iowa) **jst.sagepub.com/content/21/2/47.abstract**

Keep in mind that one assistive technology tool may not provide all the support your son or daughter needs.

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