Chipping In

How Technology Can Complement Speech Therapy Practices

BY JOAN GREEN, M.A., CCC-SLP

Technology can help improve reading, writing, talking, listening, attention, concentration, thinking, reasoning, judgment and memory. The activities can be fun and stimulating for all ages. Children using technology can often reach their goals faster and have much more fun in the process.

Speaking, reading, writing, organizing, learning and remembering are activities that most of us take for granted. However, these very activities provide monumental barriers for many children with a variety of challenges. I am the mother of four young children and a speech pathologist specializing in integrating computers and technology into therapy. I understand firsthand how stressed and busy life can be for parents trying to manage both work and family, so I know that it is difficult to add more responsibilities to our daily routines. However, I also have seen how "the system" has changed since I became a speech pathologist almost 20 years ago. Many speech and language needs of our children are no longer picked up in the schools. In many ways, therapy services have improved, and more children are identified earlier with needing special services. In contrast, however, many issues which used to be addressed with speech therapy are no longer funded by the school systems if they do not impact the child academically. I see children getting older and older with articulation, language, voice and fluency problems which are often harder to correct as the patterns become reinforced. School speech pathologists generally are told not to recommend intervention that the school system can't provide so parents are left to identify needs on their own and pursue therapy privately. This can be enormously expensive, time consuming and difficult to fit into an already busy lifestyle.

One solution to this growing problem is to capitalize on the benefits of technology. Parents, therapists and educators need to be challenged to take advantage of the technological advances in society and creatively figure out how children with a wide variety of needs can benefit from them. We need to learn what is available, select the most appropriate software and devices, and strive to efficiently and cost effectively incorporate the advances into children's routines. Once the computer activities are identified and taught, they can often be practiced over and over again by our children without our direct participation until new skills and strategies are mastered. This frees up our time and the time of the professionals to work on other areas needing our expertise that can't be addressed with the computer.

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Recent research has shown that the brain is capable of neuronal proliferation when properly stimulated. The greatest hindrance to the utilization of this technology is lack of awareness of its existence and an

approach toward its implementation. We parents need to take the initiative to be advocates for our children. We need to be aware of IEP goals and pursue learning about available resources and then work together with professionals to integrate the technology our children will thrive on into their daily routines to maximize outcomes. Careful consideration needs to be given to which software to use and how to use it. Software and other tech-based devices provide an opportunity for drill and practice in a nonjudgmental, fun and interactive way. The level of practice and progression of activities can be closely controlled and monitored for each child to achieve the greatest results and minimize frustration.

If your child is having difficulty with learning words, reading and writing, practice with computers may be the perfect solution. For our prereading children, there is a wide variety of both mainstream and specialized software. Try starting with Reader Rabbit and JumpStart software. They provide good early computer experiences, engender positive feelings toward computers and introduce important prereading and reading concepts. These and other programs also stress the importance of investigation and discovery, without which learning becomes rote and imaginations stifled. Wrong answers are dealt with in an entirely nonthreatening way. Mainstream software can be found for children of all ages with a variety of interests. Check out: www.amazon.com, www.jumpstart.com, www.readerrabbit.com, www.riverdeep.com.

There are many specialized programs to improve reading. Lexia software reinforces precursors to reading and provides practice in activities such as rhyming, initial and final consonant sounds, word segmenting, blending and strategies to improve reading. Thinking Reader presents core, authentic literature in a highly supportive and motivating way. Reading strategies are embedded into the tasks. Merit software is great for middle and high school students. Check out: www.lexialearning.com, www.tomsnyder.com, www.meritsoftware.com.

There is a continuum of options available for children in school who struggle with reading and writing. These range from no-tech options such as reading guides, Post-it notes and highlighters, to mid-tech options such as lighting, digital recorders, hand-held scanners and audio books to high-tech options. High-tech options include screen readers, start-to-finish books and scanning and talking word processors. Students are able to slow down the rate of the speech, select the type of voice used and have the words highlighted as they are read aloud. The Department of Education announced in July 2004 that it has formally endorsed a voluntary national publishing paradigm known as the National Instructional Materials Accessibility Standard (NIMAS). The standard will make it easier to convert traditional textbooks into formats such as text-to-speech.

For students who have difficulty writing, spell checkers, grammar checkers and word prediction software with screen reading make a difference. Some software also provide several embedded effective study

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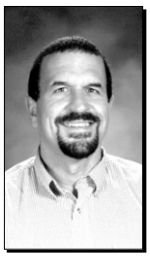

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tools. There are also visual organizers such as Kidspiration software so that students can brainstorm ideas for a story, then visually organize the narrative. Check out these websites for more information: www.readingmadeeasy.com, www.donjohnston.com, www.texthelp.com, www.kurzweiledu.com, www.inspiration.com.

Computers can also greatly help with impaired memory and thinking. Software and personal digital assistants can be programmed to remind a forgetful person about routines, appointments and medicines. Digital recorders can also help with organization, communication and memory. Software such as Pajama Sam and Putt Putt can help with problem solving in a fun way. Check out www.funkidsgames.com, www.learningfundamentals.com, www.brain-train.com.

Specialized software can be very helpful for children with auditory processing difficulties. Programs such as FastForward and Earobics can target particular tasks working with phonological awareness, auditory processing and phonics skills. Some have home versions for parents to use to supplement work done with a speech pathologist. Check out: www.fastForword.com, www.earobics.com.

The Internet is a great tool that helps struggling children and their parents gain access to the wide array of organizations and businesses providing learning devices, therapy and support. Learning to use search engines and good search techniques can empower people to continue to be strong self-advocates. It is also an efficient way to locate the many local, regional, national, global and online resources to assist with improving the quality of life. There are a number of organizations dedicated to helping children with special needs. Parenting a child with developmental delays, learning differences and/or AD/HD can sometimes be an overwhelming and isolating experience.

Support groups are helpful but aren't always easy to access, particularly if you live in a rural area or have a busy schedule that doesn't permit you to attend regularly. Increasingly, parents are going online and joining Internet-based communities that focus on parenting and educating children. Connecting with others who share common experiences can be a huge relief from isolation. Online communities can connect you with experts. They also offer flexibility in the time, location and pace of participation.

There are also some drawbacks. Misinformation might be exchanged in online communities. Also, very few organizations are able to provide expert guidance to the discussions, and sometimes the written word can't adequately communicate a message that would be more accurately perceived when speaking to someone in person. For more information, check out these websites: www.schwablearning.org (Learning Differences), www.ldresources.com (Learning

Disability Resources), www.asha.org (American Speech-Language Association), www.apraxia-kids.org, www.biausa.org (Brain injury Assocation).

Games motivate children to work on communication, cognition and literacy. Many games can be found online for free. Some fun sites for kids to explore include: www.usmint.gov, www.funbrain.com.

One of the greatest challenges to rehabilitation professionals today is how to help people with special needs benefit from this new world which has enriched the lives of so many people. In today's school systems with large caseloads and reduced budgets, it is difficult for professionals to take the time to study all of the available software, become adept at using the assistive technology and invest the time and money to become skilled therapists with computers. As parents, we can make a huge difference in our children's lives by working together with speech pathologists and other educators and exploring the tools of technology. ■

Joan Lipman Green is the founder of Innovative Speech Therapy (IST), established in 1993. IST provides individual and group therapy, consultations and technology training programs for professionals and intensive training programs for both children and adults. She specializes in integrating computers and technology into speech therapy services for people with a wide variety of communication and cognitive challenges. She may be reached online at Joan@innovativespeech.com. More information can also be found on IST's website, www.innnovativespeech.com.

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