Technology

In today's day and age, it seems our whole world revolves around smart phones, tablets and the internet. "Google It!" or "I'll 'friend' you later!" or "Did you see that Tweet?" are just a few of the popular phrases associated with the internet and online social networking that can be heard almost everywhere we turn.

The goals and uses of technology are very different for adolescents and young adults. These tools can be very empowering for adolescents transitioning into young adulthood, especially for individuals with autism. Technology can help your child become more independent, work on his or her challenges and improve upon his or her strengths.

How Technology Can Help

Below is a list of just some of the ways technology can help your child:

Communication

Likely the most common use of technology to help children and adults with autism is to improve communication skills. There are hundreds of apps and many built-in features of these devices that can help support individuals with autism at all levels and abilities. One app for example could be geared toward a nonverbal child or adult, while another can help with social cues for an individual with strong verbal communication skills. You can find apps for communication in the Autism Speaks apps database at **autismspeaks.org/autism-apps**.

Visual schedules

Visual schedules on tablets can be a great tool to help your child complete tasks and work on skills like self-care and daily living. For example, a visual schedule for an evening routine can help him or her learn to manage time and gradually master a routine on his or her own – from an after school snack, to homework, to teeth brushing and everything in between. These visual schedules can be very helpful in helping your child learn independent living skills, among others.

Decision-making

Individuals with autism who have more difficulty communicating can use technology to make their "voices" heard regarding decisions, which helps foster the self-advocacy skills that are so important as they age into adulthood. You can start small, like instead of ordering for your child at a restaurant, he or she can use a smartphone or tablet to point to the item he or she wants.

Motivating tool

Technological devices like smartphone and tablets can also serve as motivation for your child. The use of an iPad or a favorite game app can serve as a reward for positive behavior like the completion of a chore or a homework assignment.

Video modeling

Video modeling is a method that involves teaching skills in a visual way. The video could be of the individual him or herself completing a task or assignment, or of a teacher, educator or parent teaching the skills and steps required. Your child can watch these videos as often as he or she likes/needs to help learn important skills. Because the videos involve using a tablet or smartphone, he or she is most likely more interested in learning the skills this way. Video modeling can help with a wide array of skills including hygiene, job tasks and more.

Jennifer is 15-years-old and has moderate autism. Her language is repetitive and she often has difficulty making her needs known. Her mother tries to encourage independence and suggests that Jen order her own drink at Starbucks. At first, Jen's mom carried pictures around with her and had Jen point at the coffee or the chocolate picture, and then the cold or the hot picture.

Jennifer's mother realized that this process was a challenge for Jennifer, and wasn't maximizing her potential for independence in making these decisions. Jennifer's mom decided to use an iPad to help with Jennifer's communication skills. She purchased an app that allows Jen to make menu choices right on the screen. Now, Jen can go into Starbucks with her iPad and place her order using the options she sees on the device. She can use this program to make menu decisions at other shops as well. Jennifer is thrilled that she is now able to get the drink she wants, all on her own.

In speaking with Jennifer's mother about this new process, she explained that there was a time when she would have answered for Jennifer, and may or may not have ordered what Jennifer wanted. In the past, this had been a cause for outbursts. But ever since she purchased her iPad, Jennifer can now use the device to communicate her wants, and outings such as trips to Starbucks are much more successful.

Social networking

It can sometimes be easier for an individual with autism to socialize via social networking than through the more traditional methods. Making friends or communicating with others online can help him or her work on the skills that might translate at school, work or out in the community.

Vocational assistance

Technology can be very helpful to some young adults and adults with autism in the workplace. For example, step-by-step checklists can help your child stay on top of tasks and complete them in an orderly and successful manner. Reminders and notes about each task in case he or she forget something, rather than continuously asking an employer or coworker, can also help your child become more independent in the workplace.

Social Media and Internet Safety

Individuals with autism are just as interested, if not more interested, in using the internet as a connection to mass amounts of information and people. To ensure the safety and success of internet usage, it is critical that these individuals learn how to protect themselves online, and that they understand what is and isn't appropriate on the internet.

Some organizations have specific classes to teach safe and fun ways to use the internet. You should closely monitor your child's internet use and constantly make sure that his or her activity is safe and appropriate.

Below are some social networking safety tips for tweens and teens from the Federal Trade Commission that you should share with your adolescent:

Think about how different sites work before deciding to join a site. Some sites will allow only a defined community of users to access posted content; others allow anyone and everyone to view postings.

Think about keeping some control over the information you post. Consider restricting access to your page or accounts to a select group of people for example, your friends from school, your club, your team or your family.

Keep your information to yourself! Don't post your full name, Social Security number, address, phone number or bank or credit card account numbers – and don't post other people's either. Be cautious about posting information that could be used to identify you or locate you offline. This could include the name of your school, sports team, club and where you work or hang out.

Make sure your screen name or account name doesn't say too much about you. Don't use your name, age or hometown. Even if you think your screen name makes you anonymous, it doesn't take a genius to combine clues to figure out who you are and where you can be found!

Post only information that you are comfortable with others seeing – and knowing about you. Many people can see your page, including your parents, your teachers, the police, the college you might want to apply to next year, or the job you might want to apply for in three years.

Remember that once you post information on-line, you can't take it back. Even if you delete the information from a site, older versions exist on other people's computers.

Flirting with strangers online could have serious consequences. Because some people lie about who they really are, you never really know who you're dealing with.

Be wary if a new online friend wants to meet you in person. Before you decide to meet someone, do your research. If you do decide to meet the person, be smart about it: Meet in a public place, during the day, with friends you trust. Tell an adult or a responsible sibling where you're going and when you expect to be back.

Trust your gut if you have suspicions! If you feel threatened by someone or uncomfortable because of something online, tell an adult you trust and report it to the police and the site. You could end up preventing someone else from becoming a victim.

# The Importance of Digital Literacy

Digital literacy, or knowing how to operate digital devices like smartphones, tablets and computers, has become a very important skill over the last decade. Especially in a world where the large majority of employment opportunities involve the ability to use technology, teaching these skills to individuals with autism should begin at an early age. Your child may not have the ability to communicate in a traditional way or may become very uncomfortable in a workplace setting, but as long as he or she can contribute important work-related skills to his or her job, finding and maintaining one will be much less difficult.

Teaching your child things like email, word processing, internet browsing and more will be beneficial to him or her throughout the teen years and adulthood. These lessons also can include social media use and what is and isn't appropriate to share online. This knowledge can also help with fostering more independence for your child and can open the doors to more opportunities in high school, postsecondary education programs and eventually employment.

Autism Expressed is an online interacting learning system that teaches marketable, digital life skills to promote independence for students in a technology driven society and economy. Learn more and sign up at **autismexpressed.com**.

Assessments

Technology can also be used to conduct assessments that identify your child's strengths and help pinpoint areas where he or she may face challenges. Assessments that are conducted through interviews or by pen and paper can often be difficult for children and adults with autism, so those available through computers and tablets have been found to be very beneficial. These assessments can help you tailor your child's learning programs in a way that will continue to build upon his or her strengths and abilities and improve on skills he or she has trouble with.
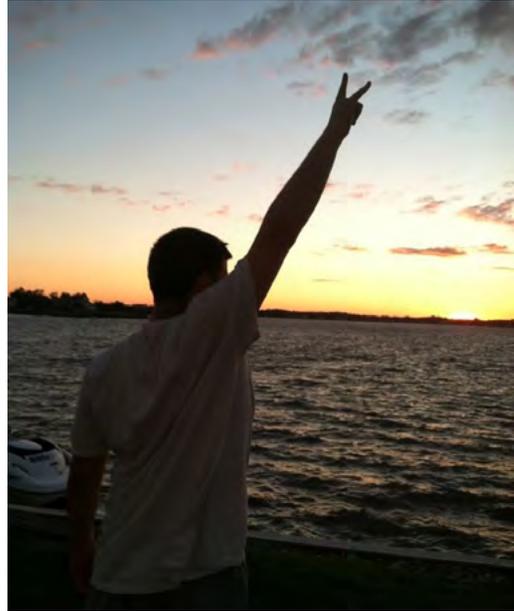
For example, **Identifor** is the first digital tool that uses games to reveal how a person likes to spend his or her time and matches that with relevant career options, setting students on a personal path to a fulfilling future.

Ask your child's school about online or digital assessments that can allow you to identify factors that will help you develop a more personalized transition plan for your child.

Conclusion

Technology has the potential to play a major role in your child's transition plan, especially in today's world where it seems like technology rules all. There are definitely dangers out there on the internet that are important to make your child aware of, but for the most part, the internet and technological devices and advances have been and will continue to be vital resources for people with autism.

Do your research and learn how you can best maximize the effects of technology on your child. Find tools, apps and websites that will help prepare him or her for the future by teaching important skills, increasing independence and expanding upon abilities and strengths that will be critical on the road to adulthood. There is truly something for everyone!