◤ Baby Power: A Guide For Families For Using Assistive Technology With Their Infants and Toddlers

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◤ Chapter 1: Assistive Technology and Infants and Toddlers

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Description of chapter:

The author defines assistive technology and provides a rationale for considering its use with infants and toddlers. She also provides a brief overview of the guide.

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Introduction

For many of us the mere mention of the word "technology" makes our heart race and our palms sweat. A recent survey conducted by the International Electronics Commission indicated that 9 out of 10 of us cannot program our VCRs. Each day, however, we all use a variety of pieces of technology. Every time we ride in a car or make a phone call or cook diner, we are using technology. These "machines" help us to do things faster and better and hopefully make our lives easier.

Technology can help people with disabilities even more. Assistive technologies, from wheelchairs to computers, can help everyone to move, express themselves, and carry out other aspects of their daily lives as easily and as independently as possible. The term "assistive technology" applies to, "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 functional capabilities of individuals with disabilities" (Technology Related Assistance for Individuals with Disabilities Act of 1988). Assistive technology can include adapted toys, computers, seating systems, powered mobility equipment, augmentative communication devices, adaptive switches. There are literally thousands of commercially available and home made assistive technology solutions to improve an individual's ability to learn, compete, work, and interact with family and friends.

Assistive technology is a means rather than an end in itself. An adaptive switch to activate a toy is a means to more independent play. Touching a computer screen to create sounds and colors can help children gain an understanding of the effect their actions can have on the world. Pointing to pictures can be a way for children with communication difficulties to interact with other children and family members.

Assistive technology, more than just equipment, is a type of service delivery requiring assessment and intervention. Successful use of assistive technology requires appropriate assessments which lead to identification of appropriate solutions. All persons involved in the lives of people using assistive technology and the person himself should be involved in choosing types of equipment. People who use assistive technologies and their significant others must all be educated in the use and maintenance of the equipment and have continued support.

Federal laws such as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 1991) require that assistive technology equipment and services be provided to children with disabilities by the public agency (e.g., public school, state funded early intervention program) serving them. Families and professionals work together as collaborators to develop appropriate Individualized and Family Services Plans (IFSP) for birth to three year old children and Individual Education Plans (IEP) for 3 to 21 year olds which include goals for learning and independence. Assistive technologies felt to be necessary by parents and professionals for their children to achieve their goals should be included in the written IFSPs and IEPs. Assistive technology is felt to be essential by parents, educators, and lawmakers alike in the education and success of children, ages birth through twenty-one years, with special needs.

What is Assistive Technology?

Sometimes even very young children may be at risk for having difficulties learning to do all the things that other children can do. Many of these children have known conditions such as Down Syndrome and Cerebral Palsy which may affect their development. Other babies who may be at risk for learning problems include those born prematurely and/or very small. We are not saying that these children will not learn to walk, talk, feed themselves, and play with other children, but that these infants and toddlers may be a little slower in developing these abilities. Some of these children may learn to do all the things that other children do but in different ways. Using assistive technologies with these children may help them to develop and use their skills to the best of their

potential. We do not have a crystal ball to know how a baby is going to develop, how he or she is going to look, think, or feel as he or she grows older. Using assistive technology, if only for a brief period of time, may give these children the extra support they need to develop and use skills on their own.

We all want our babies to realize that they can have an effect on their world. Using adaptive toy and special chairs that help them to sit up right and use their eyes and arms are just a few examples of the assistive technologies that may help infants and toddlers along their learning, moving, talking way.

About This Guide

Using assistive technology with infants and toddlers is a new area but one that holds much promise in helping children to become all that they can. We have compiled some suggestions and guidelines for using assistive technology to help families with different aspects of their baby's life like eating, playing, moving, and talking. Many of these ideas come from our experiences working with infants and toddlers with special needs and from their families. This information should be used as a to support for families in helping all their children to be happy, healthy, and to learn all that they can.

We realize that using assistive technologies out of the context of daily life and being therapists and teachers are among some of the last things that families have time to do! We hope that parents will be able to use the suggested equipment and activities as needed within their daily routines. Some of the information can be used just to give parents a better idea of the "whys" and "hows" of what their professional partners are doing and suggesting.

We know that these first three years of life are an exciting and wonderful time for all babies and their caregivers. Everyone should be able to have fun and experience all the joy and hope that these early years can yield. The suggested assistive technology equipment and strategies for using them will help infants and toddlers to experience and enjoy their early years.

In each chapter we have included basic information on "nuts & bolts," strategies to try, sample IFSP goals, things to consider as a child "transitions" into new programs, and helpful resources. Many of the strategies may seem simple, mainly because they are. These small and easy to use suggestions will hopefully make life a little easier and help to facilitate continued growth and development. Each suggested piece of equipment and activity can add to a parent's tender, loving care. Using assistive technology equipment and strategies can provide infants and toddlers with many of the same experiences afforded the child without adaptive needs. Using assistive technology can help all babies have the power to learn, enjoy, and take their place in our hearts, lives, and in society.

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