



Searching through the clutter on the Web

Websites provide helpful autism resources

April is Autism Awareness Month. It seems not a week goes by without a story in the news covering some aspect of this increasingly common disorder. Recently, stories about the recategorizing of autism by the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (aka the “psychiatrist’s bible”), an increase in the reported prevalence of the condition from 1 in 110 to 1 in 88 children being affected, and the weight of expectant mothers possibly playing a role in its development all have made headlines.



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InSites

Autism is a disorder that impairs, to varying degrees, a person’s ability to communicate and interact socially. For a species as social as humans, this can be devastating to individuals — and their families — who are on the more severe range of the spectrum. While no one welcomes an increase in autism, an increased awareness means that more resources are being devoted to finding the causes and, hopefully, a cure.

The combination of increased research and innovations in technology is producing a wealth of high-tech tools to help the afflicted, their caregivers and educators. In fact, there are so many websites and apps, with more becoming available all of the time, that sorting through them all can be overwhelming. Everyone with autism is affected in unique ways, so finding the right apps to suit individual needs can be daunting.

Wheat from the chaff
The world of interactive media is a huge, cluttered mess full of the good, the bad and the ugly. Wading through the muck of piano-playing cat websites and “Places I’ve Pooped” apps in search of useful resources and tools can be exhausting. Fortunately, there are some websites that have done the dirty work for you. Here are four sites that feature helpful information and lists of apps designed to help those dealing with autism or other special needs:

AutismPluggedIn.com — This site is the creation of Jack Kieffer, an ambitious young man — he identifies himself as a student, and his photo looks like he’s in his early high school years — who combined his passion for technology with the volunteer work he does with autistic kids. The site features reviews of iPad and iPhone apps that can help autistic kids develop their communication and social skills. Most of the reviews are written by Jack, with a few credited to a guest author. One useful review was the Top 10 Augmentative and Alternate Communication Apps Under \$30. Special-needs apps can be expensive, and you don’t know if they will serve your child’s needs until you try them, so inexpensive apps let you test the waters without breaking the bank.

AutismSpeaks.org — This is the website for the nation’s largest autism advocacy organization. The site has sections on news, science, advocacy, family services, events, donating and descriptions of autism. There are many pages of information, links and other resources acces-

sible from this site, including a long list of autism apps in the Family Services section.

BridgingApps.org — The stated purpose of this site is to bridge the gap between technology and people with disabilities. The site is run by a collection of volunteer parents, therapists, doctors and educators who want to share information on utilizing mobile devices to help people with special needs. Their focus is on helping people find apps that meet specific needs. The site features a customizable search tool that lets you combine keywords with skill levels, specific hardware and more. Apps are rated on a five-star scale.

HowToLearn.com — The focus of this site is learning in general, not just for individuals with special needs. One of the features on the home page is a directory of top 101 websites for various categories — and one of those lists is sites for people with special needs. The list is broken into subcategories, so you can easily find just the sites devoted to autism, or any other disorder.

Computers and mobile apps can be used for many things. People use them to work, play, date, create, communicate, educate, waste time and even commit crime. Using this technology to help disadvantaged people get the most out of life is among the best uses I can imagine. Apps for autism are not a cure, but, combined with a strategy of education, therapy and treatment, they can be a valuable weapon in the battle against it.

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