KEVIN O'NEILL / STAFF ARTIST

Application & development

Apps may help autistic kids communicate

Today is the last day of Autism Awareness Month. Like an ever growing number of families, my family has felt the direct impact of this heart-breaking disorder. Autism limits a person's ability to communicate and socialize with others. Because we are social creatures by nature, these limitations can have a profound effect on a person's ability to make friends, get a job or meet someone and fall in love. For many, it means being trapped inside a miswired mind, living alone in a world where they're surrounded by people.

When a loved one has his or her quality of life severely restricted, the search for solutions can be exhausting. Early intervention sessions, speech therapists, occupational therapists, special education classes, therapeutic support staff, pediatric neurologists, classroom aides, various medications — they all become a normal part of your daily routine. Sometimes you wonder if it's all making a difference, but then you realize it would probably be even more difficult without all the help.

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InSites

Apps offer hope

Technology has introduced some new tools for those living and working with autistic kids. There's an expanding list of special education apps for electronic devices, like the iPad and iPod, that offer some hope for kids with developmental disorders. Because autism is a spectrum disorder, meaning there's a range of symptoms and severity that are unique to the individual, none of these apps is likely to be a silver bullet cure. But some of these apps are likely to be helpful, and any progress in this struggle is welcome.

If you have an iPhone, iPod Touch or iPad, then you're familiar with getting apps from the App Store in iTunes. There's a special education section with lots of apps for various disabilities. Prices range from free to $189.99, but the vast majority are under $30. Some of the free ones are limited versions of apps you have to buy, and they're littered with annoying prompts to upgrade to the pay version. I'll be focusing on apps that run on Apple's devices, but there are many available for smart phones using the Android and Windows operating systems.

I've downloaded several special education apps for my son, who is autistic. Our biggest issue with him is communication because at 13 he still doesn't talk. He uses a limited number of sign language gestures so I got an app called **Baby ASL (American Sign Language) HD.** The app has a list of many common words with accompanying flash cards. Clicking on one button shows a video of someone demonstrating the sign for the word. Another button plays a recording of the word being spoken. Hopefully this will help us expand our sign language vocabulary.

Another app I downloaded is called **Look-2-Learn ($14.99).** It comes preloaded with pictures of common items in several categories. The categories are: snacks, meals, indoor play, outdoor play, basic needs and emotions. When you launch the app, the main screen displays a generic image of a boy or girl on the left under the words "I want." There's a button on the bottom to select an image. The button takes you to a page with the categories displayed. Pick a category and select one of the images. For instance, you might pick a picture of an apple from the snacks category. The apple is now placed next to the boy or girl on the main page with the word "apple" above it. Press the image of the child and the audio says "I want," then press the selected image and it says "apple."

The hope is that the child will learn to associate the pictures, written and spoken words, and use them to communicate their needs. It's a portable, electronic version of the picture exchange cards many parents use to facilitate communication with learning disabled children.

Make it personal

One of the nice features of Look-2-Learn is that it's customizable. You can upload pictures from the child's actual environment, such as the child's bedroom or favorite toy, to make the images more meaningful to the individual child. The generic picture of the boy or girl can be replaced with a picture of your child, and you can record the names of the items in your own voice to make it familiar.

I can't vouch for any of these apps yet since I haven't had them long enough to devote the time necessary to work with them. I hope with consistent use we can break down some of the communication barriers.

I've downloaded games and drawing apps in addition to the educational ones we use so my son doesn't only associate his iPod with work. If it also represents fun, he's more likely to respond positively to using it. Get a sturdy, protective case for your device though. They're expensive — and easy for a kid to throw across the room.

KEVIN O'NEILL is a graphic artist for The Times-Tribune. Contact him at koneill@timesshamrock.com with links to your favorite websites.