



A HANDY APP

Sign language can be a breakthrough in communication for intellectually disabled

People are social creatures. Communicating with each other is vital to a happy, healthy life. When someone has trouble talking to other people, because of hearing issues or an intellectual disability, their quality of life suffers.

Sign language can help bridge the communication gap for many people. For hard-of-hearing people it's an essential skill to help them navigate life. They can communicate with family members who learn to sign and others with hearing issues. Also, many schools and public venues provide sign language interpreters. They still face many barriers to easy communication, but signing helps.

American Sign Language also can help some people with intellectual disabilities. My



KEVIN O'NEILL
InSites

son is nonverbal, but he can understand most of what is said to him. The problem is he can't tell you what he wants using words. Learning to sign some of his needs makes life easier for everyone.

Currently we have a handful of signs that he uses effectively. We're trying to build on that vocabulary to meet more of his needs. **SignSchool**, an iOS app available for free in Apple's App Store, is a great tool for learning more signs.

There are many apps and

websites devoted to American Sign Language. Learning it is similar to learning any second language. There are grammar, dialects and other etiquette to master. It takes several years to really master it. Some of the apps and sites are geared toward becoming fluent while others are designed more as aids to picking up common words and phrases. SignSchool is the latter.

The app has four basic features. Sign of the Day is what greets you when you launch the app. You can scroll sideways through a list of random words while a video of a person signing the word plays. Click on the turtle icon to slow down the video.

The feature I use the most is Dictionary. It's an alphabetical list of thousands of words that

you can view videos of the signs for. You can scroll down the list and pick words or use the search bar at the top to find any word.

There's a section called Letters & Numbers that shows the signs for the entire alphabet and the numbers one through 10. I don't know why it doesn't cover zero. Learning the alphabet allows you to spell words that you can't sign, such as someone's name or technical terms.

The last section is Topics. Words and phrases are grouped by topic such as Abstract Ideas, Food or Health Care.

SignSchool won't teach you to be a fluent signer, but it's good for learning a variety of signs.

KEVIN O'NEILL is a staff artist for The Times-Tribune. Share your favorite websites and apps with him at koneill@timeshamrock.com.