Assistive Technology Helps Children Gain More Control of Their Environment | CPD

Dane uses a device to communicate as he plays. These activities help move him down the path to speech.

Whether it’s a simple switch or a high-tech communication device, technology can do a lot to help a young child with disabilities gain a little control over his world. After two-year-old Dane spent eight months in the CPD’s Techno Tots program, his mother Kacee Udy explains it this way: “He’s learned that if he pushes a button, something happens.” It might activate a line of toy penguins that march up a ladder or play a recorded message, but it’s interesting, and he caused it. “It’s the same thing with communication. He’s learned that if he says something, then something happens.” Suddenly, crying slipped a lot lower in his communication strategy. Kacee said it’s not just the technology that’s made the difference, it’s the strategies she’s learned. For example, she started with sounds that are easy for her child to say and she uses repetition to reinforce what Dane learns. In the eight months he’s been in the program his vocabulary has grown from two words to 45—and Udy said the Techno Tots classes have done a lot to make it happen. Techno Tots classes are offered through the CPD’s Up to 3 program. The toys, gizmos and gadgets in the Techno Tots lab are a lot more than fun. They help children choose between actions and reactions. If a child pushes the right button on a communication device, a recorded voice can say, “I don’t like that” the next time her speech therapist tries to engage her in a game she doesn’t want to play. In the meantime she learns how nice it is to let other people know what you really want. Other devices can help a toddler sit independently or learn to use a motorized wheelchair. They are targeted at all the categories of assistive technology addressed in early intervention: mobility, seating and positioning, augmentative/alternative communication, adaptive play, computer access and activities of daily living. In an effort to stimulate early literacy, the class also uses digital pictures from a child’s own life to create personalized books for tots who may not yet be interested in books. “Our main focus is to say, come in, we’ll show you some techniques to use,” said Amy Henningsen, an occupational therapist with the Up to 3 program and the Assistive Technology Lab. The Techno Tots room is stockpiled with equipment that is lent out to parents. They and their children try out gadgets and gizmos as high-tech as a programmable communications device or as low-tech as a child-sized desk made from durable, painted cardboard.

Speech and Language Pathologist Stacy Sessions said the activities that she does with the children in Techno Tots—even those that allow an electronic device to speak for the child—are designed to keep them moving down the path toward speech. Sessions tells parents not to worry if a child just pushes buttons and babbles while exploring a new device. That’s how they learn. It was like that for Dane; he didn’t instantly warm up to the simple push-button devices that first came home with him, but he has now graduated to a Boardmaker Activity Pad—a much more complicated piece
of equipment that allows him to communicate specific ideas.
The program's staff works to stay abreast of techniques used in preschools and tap into many different methods to reinforce what the children are learning. The goal is to make sure that the children learn through a variety of activities, and that when they move on to the next supervisor they will be familiar with the techniques used. Meanwhile, staff members learn from trial and error, too. “We used to have singing and dancing animals,” Sessions said. “But we got rid of them because they scared the kids.”