

Assistive Technology

The Assistive Technology Act of 1998 defines assistive technology (AT) devices as any item, piece of equipment, or product system (whether acquired off the shelf, modified, or customized) that is used to increase, maintain or improve functional capabilities of individuals with disabilities. Assistive technology is any kind of technology that can be used to enhance the functional independence of a person with a disability. Often, for people with disabilities, accomplishing daily tasks such as talking with friends, going to school and work or participating in recreational activities is a challenge. Assistive Technology (AT) devices are tools to help overcome those challenges and enable people living with disabilities to enhance their quality of life and lead more independent lives.

Relevance:

Assistive technology can help children be more self-sufficient at home and in school, communicate with friends and family, get out into the community and as they grow older, find employment. More than ever before, technology makes it possible for children with special needs to lead independent and fulfilling lives.

Actions to Take:

- Obtain an evaluation of your child's AT needs in preparation for choosing assistive technology for your child. An AT evaluation will result in a recommendation for specific devices and services, including any modifications to the child's environments. The evaluation can be conducted by the school, an independent agency or an individual consultant. The school's evaluation will be directly related to achieving educational goals and outcomes.
- Give consideration to how your child's need for AT might change depending on the environment, for example, on the playground, in the classroom, at a friend's house or in a public place like a mall or library.
- Having obtained a recommendation for specific devices and services for your child, assure that training (to use the device) and ongoing technical assistance is available not only for the child, but also for family members, teachers, service providers and other people who are significantly involved in your child's life.
- Before you order additional software for your computer, review its accessibility options. See Accessibility Wizard (for MS Windows 2000 or higher: start - programs - accessories - accessibility). Always use the latest software version for programs and install updates as they become available.

Good Practices:

- Family members should always be included during team AT decision making, providing the comprehensive perspective necessary for selecting the most appropriate AT devices for children with disabilities.
- Because the specific need for assistive technology is unique to the individual, the person with a disability should play a key role in determining what works best. "Trial-and-error" may be required to find a set of appropriate tools and techniques.
- Every AT assessment should address the child's strengths as well as his/her challenges. This type of input will provide clues as to what type of technology might work and how well the child will respond to it.

Basic Facts:

Assistive technology can be anything from a simple low-tech device, such as a magnifying glass, to a complex high tech device, such as a computerized communication system. It can be big - an automated van lift for a wheelchair or small - a grip attached to a pen or fork by Velcro. Assistive technology can also be a substitute, such as an augmentative communication device that provides vocal output for a child who cannot communicate with his/her own voice.

Assistive technology helps to level the playing field for individuals with disabilities by providing them a way to fully engage in life's activities. A person with special needs may use assistive technology to travel about, participate in recreational and social activities, learn, work, communicate with others and much more.

Some AT centers offer lending programs that allow families to borrow devices for a trial period. In PA, Pennsylvanians of any age and ability can borrow AT devices, at no cost, to try at work, school, home or in their neighborhoods. This short-term loan program (Pennsylvania's Initiative on Assistive Technology) has a "try before you buy" philosophy, and helps people with special needs and their families make the right choice of AT devices before they obtain a device.

Device Reutilization and Recycling: Previously owned devices are an affordable option instead of buying new and several options are available to Pennsylvanians.

The following agencies/organizations may help to pay for Assistive Technology:

- Medical Assistance.
- Medicaid Home and Community Based Waivers.
- Private Health Insurance.
- Office of Vocational Rehabilitation.
- School Districts and Intermediate Units.

Resources:

ABLEDATA is a searchable database of 19,000 assistive technology products of all types. www.abledata.com

Center for Assistive Technology and Environmental Access is a national public website on assistive technology, including products and services. assistivetech.net/contact/index.php

The Family Center on Technology and Disability is an online source of AT organizations, resources, family guides, AT fact sheets, success stories, and more. www.fctd.info

Pennsylvania's Initiative on Assistive Technology (PIAT) strives to enhance the lives of all Pennsylvanians with disabilities, older Pennsylvanians, and their families, through access to and acquisition of assistive technology devices and services, which allow for choice, control and independence at home, work, school, play and in their neighborhoods. <http://disabilities.temple.edu/programs/assistive/piat/index.htm>

The Alliance for Technology Access (ATA) is a national network of community based resource centers, product developers, vendors, service providers, and individuals providing information and support services to children and adults with disabilities, and working to increase their use of technology. www.ataccess.org/