

Defining Assistive Technology

Assistive technology devices are mechanical aids which substitute for or enhance the function of some physical or mental ability that is impaired. Assistive technology can be anything homemade, purchased off the shelf, modified, or commercially available which is used to help an individual perform some task of daily living. The term assistive technology encompasses a broad range of devices from "low tech" (e.g., pencil grips, splints, paper stabilizers) to "high tech" (e.g., computers, voice synthesizers, braille readers). These devices include the entire range of supportive tools and equipment from adapted spoons to wheelchairs and computer systems for environmental control.

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), the federal special education law, provides the following legal definition of an assistive technology device: "any item, piece of equipment, or product system ... that is used to increase, maintain, or improve functional capabilities of individuals with disabilities." Under IDEA, assistive technology devices can be used in the educational setting to provide a variety of accommodations or adaptations for people with disabilities.

The IDEA also lists the services a school district may need to provide in order to ensure that assistive technology is useful to a student in the school setting. The law defines assistive technology service as: "any service that directly assists an individual with a disability in the selection, acquisition, or use of an assistive technology device." This service includes all of the following possibilities:

- ◆ evaluation of the technology needs of the individual, including a functional evaluation in the individual's customary environment;
- ◆ purchasing, leasing, or otherwise providing for the acquisition of assistive technology devices for individuals with disabilities;
- ◆ selecting, designing, fitting, customizing, adapting, applying, maintaining, repairing, or replacing of assistive technology devices;
- ◆ coordinating and using other therapies, interventions, or services with assistive technology devices, such as those associated with existing education and rehabilitation plans and programs;
- ◆ assistive technology training or technical assistance with assistive technology for an individual with a disability, or, where appropriate, the family of an individual with disabilities;
- ◆ training or technical assistance for professionals, employers, or other individuals who provide services to, employ, or otherwise are substantially involved in the major life functions of individuals with disabilities.

The intention of the special education law is that, if a student with disabilities needs technology in order to be able to learn, the school district will (a) evaluate the student's technology needs, (b) acquire the necessary technology, (c) coordinate technology use with other therapies and interventions, and (d) provide training for the individual, the individual's family, and the school staff in the effective use of the technology.

During the time that students with disabilities are in school, they can have the opportunity to learn to use technology at the same time that they are learning academic subjects and social skills. The efficient and effective use of assistive technology can be as basic a skill for students with disabilities as reading, writing, and arithmetic since the use of technology can go a long way toward circumventing the limitations of disability and providing students with disabilities with a "level playing field" in every area of life accomplishment.

This resource information was prepared and found at the following website:

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