



Expert Interview: Vicki Clarke MS, CCC-SLP



Vicki Clarke is the Owner and President of Dynamic Therapy Associates, Inc. She has 18 years experience as Speech Language Pathologist and Augmentative Communication Specialist specializing in state of the art AAC and AT equipment. Vicki regularly attends and presents at local, state and national assistive technology conferences, speech language pathology conferences and family-focused meetings. Trainings offered by Vicki are available for review on our Training & Workshops page. She also consults for national and international AT service, equipment and software manufacturers. Services include assessment, treatment, consultation, programming and website content management.

1. What are the top 5 apps you recommend for individuals with autism?

What a hard question! With the thousands of apps out there, it is difficult to choose the 5 apps that are best for most kids with autism. I think the challenge with the Apple iDevices (iPad, iTouch, iPhone) is that the availability of the equipment and wide variety of apps makes it tempting to put the equipment and app purchase ahead of a discrete analysis of the child's needs. It is important to look carefully at what your child and family needs and then find the apps to meet that need. We have a list of over 80 apps that we use for a variety of purposes in therapy. We use apps for communication, literacy development, reading for enjoyment, video modeling, vocabulary learning and simply for motivation. Our list continues to grow daily, as improved apps continue to appear on the market. (See: ["Favorite iTunes Apps from the AACchicks!"](#))

2. How does iPad tablet technology help kids with autism?

I believe the primary benefit of iPad technology is simply the availability of affordable, portable touchscreen technology with a wide variety of applications. We've known for years that the computer is a gateway to improving understanding of input (listening & reading) and ability to produce output (speaking & writing) for people with autism. A high percentage of people with autism are motivated by the computer. I believe that this motivation is related to the predictability of the computer's response. The user knows exactly what the computer is going to do when a specific action is completed (ex: clicking on the "x" makes the picture go away). Unlike interactions with people, the computer will always respond in an expected manner. People are messy and computers are neat! For our friends with autism, this consistency is easy to understand and comforting. The iPad puts this comfortable, predictable teaching friend right in the hands of our children with autism, regardless of where they are.

The world can be a confusing, unpredictable place with a constant barrage of input for our children who have difficulty filtering out irrelevant details around them. Many of our children struggle filtering out the sound of fans, the flickering of fluorescent lights, the murmur of people in another room...in order to attend to the relevant information in front of them, i.e. Mommy's voice asking them to "come here." Children will often find something they can control on which to focus their attention and drown out all of the confusing input around them. Many of our children self-stimulate for this purpose (hand flapping,

picking at their hands, making repetitive noises, tearing paper). Having an iPad gives them a sufficiently stimulating alternative that is also socially acceptable.

Beyond simply a distraction or calming device, the iPad has application in teaching skills, just like the computer has in the past. There are apps for teaching reading, apps for teaching social skills, apps for teaching vocabulary, and apps for communication. Careful selection can give children a doorway to improved comprehension, expression and skill development.

3. What do you recommend parents do to start the technology process?

I recommend that parents consider their child's needs first. The application of any form of technology should be driven by meeting a specific need of an individual. For example, if your child is unable to communicate, a speech generating device may be an answer (ex: Dynavox Maestro, PRC Vantage Lite, Proloquo2Go or TouchChat on the iPad). A family's needs may also be the impetus for using technology, for example, the need to go out to public events may be met by giving the child with autism an appropriate distraction during the event (iPad, MP3 player, DVD player). Educational needs may also be the driving reason for purchasing technology. Solutions may include iPad apps, computer software or adaptive equipment.

4. What's the most important thing to keep in mind when deciding on a device?

Specific needs of the child need to be the main deciding factor on purchasing any technology. When deciding on technology options, teams must consider the individual needs of the child (including sensory, physical, social and communicative issues) partner characteristics and needs, and the environmental demands. Issues which may need to be considered include durability, appropriateness of applications, volume requirements (for communication apps), and the ability of the app to meet the comprehensive needs for which they are purchased. Families should consult with the professional and personal friends who know the child and can offer input on potential needs of the child. Assistive technology specialists can offer insight into technology options. Assistive technology experts may come from a variety of professions so parents may consider speech language pathologists, occupational therapists and teachers as potential sources of information. When specifically considering aids for communication, a speech language pathologist who specializes in augmentative and alternative communication (AAC) is highly recommended to help the family consider the myriad of factors involved in selecting and implementing an effective and efficient supplement to speech. This participation is important, even if the device is easily purchased by the family (such as the iPad). Insurance and Medicaid/Medicare require a speech language pathologist to participate in the decision process because these specialists have the most training in selecting and implementing aids for communication.

It is important to understand that the mobile application devices, such as the iPad, are not the next "miracle cure" for autism, as recently proclaimed by some of our popular media. These technologies are simply another tool in our box that have the potential to help meet some of the needs of our children. As all of us have experienced, it is rare that the "miracle cure" proves to be the comprehensive solution that we all wish for. Our experience tells us that we have to make use of a variety of solutions to help

our children engage and develop to the best of their potential. The iDevices are primarily exciting in that they offer affordable, portable solutions to several difficult issues that affect our children. When applied correctly to address a specific issue, they can be very effective.

5. How can families find training for their family with their iPad or AT device?

Training for assistive technology can come from many sources. Assistive technology specialists and therapists who specialize in AAC and other forms of technology are good unbiased sources of information and training. Speech generating device manufacturers often offer training specific to their devices and implementation. Apple iDevices (iPad, iTouch & iPhone) and other mobile technologies are much harder to find training for. The expense associated with the dedicated communication devices (ex: Dynavox, Prentke Romich, Saltillo, Tobii/ATI) appears to be the result of covering the cost of staff to help with technical support and repairs, education, training and product development. These manufacturers often offer extensive in person, telephone and internet support to help troubleshoot and implement their devices. Simply related to the low-cost of apps, it is much more difficult for app developers to afford to offer the same level of significant support and training for their applications. Typically these products are supported through internet websites, blogs and videos. Some apps may also be supported through email and telephone interaction. Training and support will most likely be provided by the same team that typically works with the child: family, therapists and teachers. It is important that the family consider the level of support they need when determining if an iPad or other AT device will meet their needs.