

I must admit that it is somewhat by accident that I find myself driven towards the field of Assistive Technology. I have always enjoyed interacting with and helping people. When I was young, I started babysitting children in my neighborhood, which fostered a growing interest in childcare and child development. As my knowledge of that field grew, so did my curiosity about the effects of cultures, communities, and personal relationships on children. I pursued a degree in Child and Family Studies, an arena that looks at children not just from the view of biological and psychological growth but also in terms of how their environments affect their development. The idea that a child's familial and social support so directly impact his outcomes is one that is both obvious and eye-opening. Children are not blank slates, but what they do and love does depend so much on the environment and people around them, and most importantly on the opportunities and support given to them.

It was with this new ecological perspective that I began working with children with disabilities, first in an inclusion preschool setting and then as a behavior interventionist in home and school-based sessions with children and teenagers with autism and other special needs. While my love of working with children brought me into this field, seeing the differences it makes in people's lives is what has kept me there. I have worked with clients using a wide variety of assistive technology, from iPads and AAC devices to wheelchairs and gait trainers to adaptive school supplies and utensils. Being a part of the team that helped a child go from having hour-long tantrums because of her inability to express her wants and needs to being able to pick up her iPad, communicate, and be understood was a marvelous feeling. Watching a boy with limited fine motor skills beam with pride as he presented his mom with a construction paper crown he made using adaptive scissors was just as rewarding.

While these success stories stick out in my mind, there are still plenty of hurdles to be overcome. Individuals with disabilities are all too often unaware of the options available to them—or are painfully aware but unable to access them because of financial, cultural, or societal restraints. Even individuals with extensive support systems often do not realize the services and technologies available that could help them be independent, understood, and empowered. Families who advocate tirelessly for all sorts of special education therapies for their children often do not realize that there is a range of environmental supports and assistive equipment that could make a world of difference to them, too. My main area of interest in this field lies in improving access and education about AT options for individuals with disabilities, as well as for those in their support networks. I would like to become an informed advocate, whether continuing in one-on-one client-focused intervention or working at the legal and political level.

I know I have only touched the tip of the iceberg when it comes to learning about the use, benefits, and development of Assistive Technology. However, if the tip of the iceberg holds this much promise for how people's lives can be transformed, then I am eager to deepen my understanding of the high- and low-technology options available to children and adults with disabilities. This arena is only going to become more and more important as our elderly population grows, and we are all going to be faced with the question of how to provide support to individuals with disabilities in our own lives. As my time studying and working with children has taught me, our passions and abilities are driven by the environment and options around us, and helping individuals with disabilities access and interact with the world around them benefits not only them, but all of us. Technologies that give people a voice, a skill, or an ability in an area with

which they would otherwise struggle not only opens up their world but also brings them into ours, building more inclusive schools, work environments, and social circles. This is a change that benefits us all—and a change in which I want to be involved.