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As Seen In

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## iPad: A voice for the Disabled

Plainview, New York -- The iPad isn't just about fun and games, it's a voice for those who are unable to or just learning to speak, and a powerful teaching tool. For the last year, many students at ACDS have been able communicate, some for the first time, thanks to the iPad.

"With our population, it's exciting to use 21st century technology to help us with our goal of preparing children to transition on into the public school setting at the age of 5," explained Cecilia Barry, SBL/SDL, principal of ACDS, an early intervention and special education preschool working with individuals with Down syndrome, Autism spectrum disorders and other developmental disabilities and their families.

The road to the iPad began when Jessica Litwack, one of ACDS' speech/language pathologists first heard about how iPads were being used at a convention of the American Speech & Hearing Association in 2010. When she got an iPad as a Christmas present and played with it, she saw the potential. Then there was a student, diagnosed with Apraxia, an oral-motor speech disorder, who had difficulty communicating verbally. His tech savvy parents had discovered the iPad was an effective communication aid for their son at home and his speech therapist coordinated utilization of the iPad for home and school. Thus, an idea was born.

With donations from the Parent Teacher Organization, individual parents, as well as one provided by the Nassau Suffolk Chapter of the Autism Society of America, ACDS now has 11 iPads. Ideally, ACDS would like all 15 pre-school teachers to have an iPad; right now they are used primarily by the speech pathologists. Better still, ACDS aspires to create a library of iPads that could be loaned out to students.

Using the iPad, ACDS' littlest ones, those ages 2-5, have been able to communicate -- some for the first time. The touch-and-swipe screen gives them the ability to express themselves and serves as a tool that enables these children to participate in classroom activities with their peers.

"The iPad is being used across disabilities and has been remarkable in particular for (use with children with) autism spectrum disorder as well as those with Down syndrome," said Barry.

The iPad is versatile and can be used as an augmentative device to help individuals communicate. However, the iPad is significantly less expensive than the thousands of dollars that other augmentative devices can cost. It's also just cool, fun, and socially acceptable which matters to children who have shown that they are motivated to learn with the iPad.

"With the iPad, children are motivated to focus and pay attention for a longer period of time. Many children with Down syndrome and autism spectrum disorders are visual learners, so the iPad appeals to their learning style," said Barry. "These kids are not reading, they're using pictures to communicate. For example, they can touch a picture of a sandwich or chicken nuggets on the iPad screen to indicate their preference and a voice recorded on the iPad states their preference in response to their touch," explained Litwack.

Another effective teaching tool of the iPad is it's camera. It enables the iPad to become more dynamic and specifically geared to each child's needs. An ACDS teacher recently used the iPad as a means of assessing knowledge of identification of classmates for a child who was unable to speak. Using the iPad's camera, the teacher took a picture of the individual children in the classroom. The student was shown the iPad with these pictures and was asked to identify his friends when they were named. By touching the pictures on the iPad he was able to pick them out one by one -- thus displaying a skill no one previously knew he had.

The iPad has opened a whole new world. "Everybody loves *The Itsy Bitsy Spider*. But it's different when the kids can touch the screen and it comes to life for them," said Barry.

There are numerous apps designed for children with special needs. "The iPad has apps that not only teach readiness skills in a fun way, but many apps also have the ability to automatically record data on students progress," said Tricia Leahy, special education teacher. "We can monitor their progress with data that is automatically calculated at our finger tips!"

What's key, is ACDS' coordination with parents. "If an upcoming classroom topic is winter and the target words are coat or hat, I would have parents review the vocabulary pictures on their child's iPad with their child so that the child would be prepared for the lesson in school. This prepares them to participate, to have a voice with the lesson," said Michele Harrington, Speech/Language Pathologist. The goal, if the child has their own iPad, is to have them practice at home. Much is said about how technology is being misused by young people, but for the children at ACDS, technology is changing lives. "This is a great opportunity" said Barry.

ACDS, located in Plainview, New York is dedicated to providing lifetime resources of exceptional quality, innovation and inclusion for individuals with Down syndrome, Autism and other developmental disabilities and their families. ACDS has been providing programs and services in and around Long Island for 45 years. ACDS currently serves more than 750 children and adults, providing services that include Early Intervention and preschool special education programs, respite and recreation programs for children, teens and adults, adult Medicaid service coordination and seven supervised group homes in Nassau County.