

iPods may help Asperger's kids navigate life

July 30 2009, By Maura Lerner

Sue Pederson knows that the teenage boys in her treatment program have trouble making conversation. They may not know what to talk about; or once they get started, when to shut up.

That's one of the striking features of people with Asperger's syndrome: They struggle with the social skills that come so naturally to others.

But about a year ago, Pederson, a psychologist, and her colleagues at the Fraser Child & Family Center in Minneapolis found a new way to reach these students -- right through their headphones.

They're using iPods, which play music and videos, to teach them how to fit in.

It may have started out as a form of entertainment, but Pederson says this kind of technology is turning into an unexpected boon for children and teenagers with special needs. The devices, it turns out, can be crammed with the kind of information they need to get through the day. While it's still experimental, she said, "I think it's going to spread like wildfire."

With Asperger's, a form of autism, people lack the inner voice that tells them what is, or is not, appropriate behavior. At Fraser, Pederson's staff came up with the idea of programming iPods to act as an electronic substitute for that missing voice.

In this case, the staff helped students create a series of short videos and

slide shows on how to behave in different social settings. Some are barely 30 seconds long: How to carry on a conversation ("Let the other person talk AND change the topic ... "); how to respect other people's boundaries, and think before they speak ("Use your filter!")

In the world of special education, these scripts are known as "social stories," used to teach basic social skills. "It's a mental checklist for things to think about when you're interacting with other people," explained Mandy Henderson, who works with Fraser's Asperger's program.

As part of the Fraser project, the students can transfer the videos onto their iPods, and replay them over and over, to drive the lessons home.

Jack O'Riley, of Eagan, Minn., said it's just what his 15-year-old son P.J. needed. "This really hit the mark," he said. Like many kids with Asperger's, P.J. is baffled by the normal rhythms of social interaction: in conversation, he may blurt out too much information, or say nothing at all, his father says.

At the same time, P.J. is easily distracted and has a hard time staying on task, another common trait of Asperger's. For years, O'Riley posted laminated signs around the house to remind his son how to get through the day -- take a shower, brush his teeth, get ready for school.

Now, with the videos developed at Fraser, "we can plug this stuff into his little 'extended memory,' " O'Riley said. P.J. is building a library of videos on his iPhone, so they'll be at his fingertips. "He can pull up a topic on his 'to do list' and find everything he needs to know," his father said.

Sixteen-year-old Myles Lund of Lakeville, Minn., another student in the Fraser program, said he's learned to use the iPod to help control his

emotions by playing his favorite music. "It helps take my mind off of it," he said. At the same time, Myles, who says he rarely initiates a conversation, agrees the videos can help in social situations. "I just pull out my iPod and go through a list of things to talk about."

The staffers at Fraser came up with the idea after they noticed how students with Asperger's would use iPods as a calming device, to block out noise or other distractions. "We just started thinking, how else can we use this technology?" Pederson said. They got a \$7,500 private grant to buy the [iPods](#) and other equipment, and started experimenting.

They're not alone.

Jim Ball, an adviser to the Autism Society of America, said similar projects are popping up around the country. Some people are designing adaptations for smart phones, Palm Pilots and other devices to fill the same need, he said.

"This is just another way of prompting kids when they're in situations when they don't know what to do," said Ball, who works with autistic children in New Jersey. "The technology gives them the ability to be independent."

Ball noted the devices could work especially well with Asperger's kids, because they're often far more comfortable with electronic gadgets than they are with people.

"It's a machine; they don't have to react to it, they don't have to understand it," Ball said. "They just need to know how to work it. And they do."

Another advantage, especially for teenagers, is that they won't stand out using this kind of device, noted Pederson. "If you walk into a family

reunion and you've got a teenager with an iPod, nobody bats an eye," she said.

Barbara Luskin, a psychologist with the Autism Society of Minnesota, agrees. "Adolescents with Asperger's, like all adolescents, don't want to look different," she said. If the device just blends in with everyone else's, she said, "you're much more likely to use it."

So far, there appear to be few commercial products aimed at this market, but that may be changing. The Conover Co., a special-education software company in Appleton, Wis., recently adapted its "Functional Skills System" for the iPod Touch. But the package, which sells for \$3,500, is mainly marketed to schools and other organizations.

Fraser, meanwhile, is hoping to get another grant to expand its iPod program.

Ball, of the Autism Society, predicts this is just the beginning. "I think that technology is limitless in its potential for working with kids," he said.

ON THE WEB

For information about the Fraser program, go to www.fraser.org.

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