

# More than fun and games: iPads give autistic children a voice

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Jaime Morin, 9, was diagnosed with autism at age 2 and has been nonverbal his whole life. When the therapy he was receiving at school became insufficient, his mother, Lupe Santander, sent him to Big Sky Pediatric Therapy, where he went for speech and occupational therapy once a week. It was there that they heard of Zach's Voice, a nonprofit group that provides iPads to autistic children with communication deficiencies.

"He can say exactly what he wants with the iPad," says Santander. "When he first figured it out, the look on his face was priceless. We could finally understand him, we didn't have to say 'Yes' or 'No' when he pointed to things."

Because children with autism who are nonverbal cannot talk, the thoughts occupying their heads are unable to come out - that's where the iPad comes in. Through the application of their choice, the children can form sentences by putting together words, which come in the form of buttons and a picture to match the word. Then, they play it back for others to hear. The iPad becomes their voice.

"It facilitates their understanding of the world around them," says Danielle Skala, functional communication classroom teacher at Forest North Elementary in the Round Rock Independent School District. She has a few students who use iPads in her classroom.

Zach's Voice became an official organization last May, giving out their

first iPad the month before. Their mission is to provide iPads to children ages 3 to 21 with [autism spectrum disorder](#) who have communication disabilities. They take iPad donations from the community, as well as money donations to use toward buying refurbished iPads.

Their pilot program took place in the 2013 spring semester in Texas with the Round Rock school district, and they have since expanded to include schools in the Georgetown district.

Zach's Voice was founded by Abby Whitworth, who named the organization after her 7-year-old son. Whitworth was inspired by Zach's initial interaction with the iPad. Prior to the Apple product, he used DynaVox, a heavy device that was hard to program, Whitworth said. Besides being clunky, it also drew attention to him. With an iPad, however, he blends in.

"They're the coolest kids in school," says Skala. "The iPad gives them a social status."

A particular incident at the grocery store prompted Whitworth to spread the positive effects of the iPad to other families with nonverbal kids in the community. While shopping, she saw an autistic child walking around with note cards, which he used to communicate. The number of words available through this approach, however, is limited.

"The iPad lets kids use all the words they want," says Whitworth. "It's an unlimited amount of options, as opposed to what you get with handwritten note cards."

"With picture books and note cards, I got to decide what the kids said," says Skala. "Now, the child decides."

The application recommended by Zach's Voice is ProLoQuo2Go, which

costs \$219.99 at the iTunes store. The organization provides its recipients with a gift card that covers the cost of whatever app they decide to download. Jaime chose Lamp Words for Life, the program he had been using with his therapist.

ProLoQuo2Go lets its users add words to the program, such as family members' names and their favorite cartoon characters. Adding a button is instantaneous, and kids can customize them by taking a picture of the word they add.

"The kids start off using the app to communicate about the things they love," says Whitworth. "It's rewarding and motivates them to use the program."

Zach's Voice works with speech-language therapists at different schools to find families who would benefit from the program.

When the therapist finds a student that would be a good candidate for a communication device, they contact Hannah Markowitz, who works at the Round Rock district's Assistive Technology Team. After trying out the app with the child, the speech-language therapist will decide whether to recommend that the parents fill out an application with the organization. Zach's Voice only takes applications identified as eligible by the school district and requires the signatures of the parent, classroom teacher and speech-language pathologist.

"It's great that kids have access to the iPad at home and out in their community," says Markowitz. "It gives them ownership."

Parents must promise to use the iPad strictly for the benefit of the autistic child, and no other apps are allowed to be downloaded. The idea is that the iPad is to be used as a means to help the kid communicate and for no other purpose. It becomes part of the child's everyday activity,

just as essential as wearing shoes when they leave the house.

The iPad can do more than just help children with autism communicate; sometimes it can facilitate them to talk.

"Zach talks now," Whitworth says. "It started six months ago, about a year and a half after he first got his iPad."

According to a study done by Ann Kaiser, researcher at Vanderbilt Peabody College of Education and Human Development in Tennessee, children with autism who are minimally verbal can "learn to speak later than previously thought, and iPads are playing an increasing role in making that happen." The speech-generating devices can encourage children ages 5 to 8 to develop speaking skills, Kaiser wrote.

Jaime's speech also expanded since his first interaction with the iPad. He has started to repeat sentences and words after hearing them through the app. When he hears a certain pronunciation, he tries to imitate it.

"It opens up their world, their voice can be heard," Santander says. "He's not stuck in his little body anymore. It has given him confidence."

The iPad as a communication device also can relieve anxiety, which is common in nonverbal kids with autism.

"Being heard and understood can be a great source of relief for our kids," Whitworth says.

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