Personal Technology and the Autistic Child: What One Family Has Learned

Screen time can give autistic children needed quiet time—but can also be overstimulating. *Photo: iStockphoto/Getty Images*

By
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How much time should children spend on screen? Which kinds of games, videos or online activities are harmful to young minds, and which are neutral or even beneficial? These are difficult questions for a parent. Particularly so for a parent of an autistic child.

There is no question that some apps, online activities and videogames can hold real benefits for young minds, whether for education, fun or a combination of the two. When a parent finds the right such app or game for a particular child, it can be difficult tearing him

or her away from it.

For autistic children, however, the online world holds more than the usual dangers. Some researchers, for example, have found that autistic children are particularly prone to videogame addiction. Some even argue that excessive game playing can "tip" a child from quirky to downright autistic. The highly structured, predictable and immersive experience of gaming, they say, can reinforce the rigidity of autistic-type brains.

But there are also many researchers, parents and advocates who believe that technology can help autistic children develop their strengths and address their challenges.

Though our 10-year-old son was only recently diagnosed with autism, we've spent years experimenting with the way different tech tools can support—or exacerbate—his behavioral challenges. Over this time, I have conducted extensive research on family technology use, frequently finding myself in the crosshairs of parents who are passionately arguing over screen time.

As parents of a relatively high-functioning autistic child, we haven't needed the many apps and games that help some children learn basic language and life skills. But we've explored other ways technology can address autism. I'm not an expert in autism or child psychology, so my approach was guided primarily by what I've learned from helping organizations and professionals adopt new technology: Set your goals, and then figure out which technologies can help you get there. Here is what has worked for our son.

1. Tech as down time. Autistic people experience the world in an unfiltered form, so they are easily overwhelmed and need quiet time to escape and recalibrate; screen time can be one way to get that.

We've long found that tech can help our son handle sensory overload—whether that means listening to an audiobook after coming home from school, or retreating into the iPad for an hour after a day spent touring a new city.

But screen time can also have the opposite effect, if our son is playing a game that overstimulates him (or watches someone else play one on YouTube).

We've found that a good rule of thumb is to keep an eye on which games or activities lead to tantrums when it is time to wrap up: This kind of screen time is too stimulating. When a game or TV show has led to more than one tantrum, we take it out of circulation for at

least six months, not as punishment, but because we recognize it is too stimulating.

2. Tech as targeted therapy. There is an extraordinary range of therapeutic tools designed for autistic and anxious children that aim to teach social skills and self-regulation. But the well-reviewed game "If…," which aims to teach emotional intelligence, was so exciting that it led to daily meltdowns—an outcome that would seem to validate the fears of those who see videogaming as problematic.

I had greater success by simply playing regular iPhone games with him, holding on to the phone controls myself so that I had his full attention. After I insisted that we take three deep breaths every time our on-screen character died in the snowboarding game "Alto's Adventure," my son finally got in the habit of using breath work to manage his emotions; by talking about the situations of characters in games like "Broken Age," he opened up about his feelings in a way he'd been unable to do with a psychologist.

3. Tech for behavior tracking. Like many autistic children, my son's behaviors are unpredictable, and seem to be the product of multiple interacting factors. Tools like Birdhouse help parents keep track of their children's diets, medications, activities and behaviors, so that we can develop a plan of action; programs like Habitica (a game-ified productivity app designed for geeky adults who want their work tasks to feel like a role-playing game) can help track a child's activities and rewards.

But as the gaming skeptics might have expected, Habitica turned out to be too engaging: My son was much more interested in accumulating points and prizes within the app than using it to foster constructive offline behaviors. To avoid this pitfall, we reverted to good old-fashioned paper, printing out visual schedules and charts so that we can track his school attendance and rewards.

4. Technology as a special interest. One common autistic trait is passionate interest in a particular subject, which often holds the key to unlocking a child's development.

But there is a lively debate about whether videogames can constitute an autistic special interest: Some people think they distract children from discovering their true passion, or represent a more peer-accepted way of pursuing an underlying geeky interest (for example, by playing a rocket-building videogame instead of building rockets).

I allow my son plenty of time to play videogames, since they remain his greatest passion, but I try to uncover any underlying interests the games may mask. That includes giving

him opportunities to learn more about technology itself (he started programming at age 8) and introducing him to books and games that appeal to computer geeks.

5. Tech as community. The birth of the social internet—beginning with chat rooms and bulletin boards—has been a boon for many autistic people who are uncomfortable interacting face to face. For the same reason, it is often easier for autistic children to socialize online. This leads some parents to worry that online interaction displaces the development of face-to-face social skills.

Though our son has yet to find his tribe online, online support has been very helpful to our own work in raising him. Online groups for the parents of gifted, autistic and other special-needs children have introduced me to research on a particular type of autism that describes our son; helped me get advice on how to manage the transition back to school; and given me support on the many days when I feel totally drained by a major meltdown. Perhaps I would be better off honing my own offline social skills, but like many parents of special-needs children, online community is often all that I have the time, energy and flexibility to access.

As our experiences show, there is no simple answer to the question of whether technology helps or harms autistic children, any more than there is an easy answer to whether technology is good or bad for society as a whole. To make technology a constructive influence, we need to get past talking about "screen time" as if it were a single thing, and start looking at the impact that specific kinds of screen time have on specific people and behaviors.

That is particularly true for autistic children, who are exceptionally sensitive but who may lack the executive function to regulate their own technology use. By recognizing the opportunities different kinds of screen time can offer these children—and carefully observing its effects—we can help autistic children harness technology as an asset to their own growth and development.

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