

iPads and Autism

Autism expert Craig Smith visited New Zealand recently to promote the use of Apple's iPad in the teaching of children with the learning disorder. He believes the device is making a world of difference for them, as Lee Suckling discovered.

"The key thing about children with autism is that they learn entirely with what they can see, not what they hear or read," said Smith, educational research consultant of Autism Spectrum Australia (Aspect). "The iPad, in that respect, is ideal. Working with it is based on visually teaching kids what they otherwise struggle to comprehend, by tapping into their key strength."

Smith believes the Apple tablet device is a powerful tool for individuals with autism, in part because of the way they process information.

"Ninety per cent of the information an individual with autism processes is visual, while only 10 per cent is auditory. The iPad presents information in such a visual way that it really resonates with how we need to engage children with autism in the classroom. We're always encouraging educators to teach more visually and this is something the iPad has a natural affinity for doing successfully."

Many children with autism have "restrictive interests and obsessions", explains Smith, and they struggle in traditional classroom environments that do not allow them to focus on these. With learning via the iPad, it's easier to adapt lessons for autistic pupils.

Fostering special interests

"Special interests are a big part of the profile of children with autism – for children who find communication and social skills so overwhelming and complex, often their special interests are the only thing that they can totally understand and rely on. In the classroom we need to foster these special interests, and the iPad helps us to do this."

Smith recalls a former pupil's experience with the iPad and her special interests.

"A girl we used to teach was fascinated with cats and anything to do with them, so we were able to use the iPad to tailor her academic work, and her autism-specific needs, around this. We did it in a way that was highly motivating and allowed her to reach significant personal milestones."

Importantly, according to Smith, the iPad is a socially-inclusive tool for autistic children.

"In the past, especially in schools, autistic kids would have everything printed out for them – from timetables to social scripts – and it signified to every other pupil 'This kid is different'. However, now that kid looks like everyone else because their classmates all have handheld devices, too."

Several iPad apps have been particularly influential on autistic children in Australia and New Zealand, with Choiceworks (beevisual.com) Smith's top recommendation.

Feelings and responses

"It uses emotional choice boards to teach kids to log their feelings. For example, many autistic children become angry or sad quickly.



The app lets them record what they felt prior to being angry or sad, so they can learn about how they arrived at that emotion. Then, it helps suggest actions on what to do – such as to talk to a teacher or go for a walk, for example – before they can go back to working with the other kids."

iPad apps such as this are ideal because they give autistic children independence, believes Smith.

"It has traditionally been really hard for teachers in mainstream schools to regulate these kinds of feelings but this type of app helps kids to focus on the choices they can make. It gives them control. Independently, it allows kids to grow in leaps and bounds."

While some apps for autistic children are available in Android and Microsoft tablet formats, Smith believes no other device is currently comparable with the iPad for these kinds of pupils.

"For now, its natural accessibility options are far superior to those on other devices," he added. "If they have physical issues with sight, there are accessibility options to tailor the screen to individual needs. The same goes for hearing. Right out of the box, the iPad is built for these kinds of apps." >

LEE SUCKLING WRITES FOR *INTERFACE* MAGAZINE.

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OTHER NOTABLE APPS FOR AUTISM

Proloquo2Go (assistiveware.com), which teaches children how to construct sentences using symbols and pictures, **Stories2Learn** (look2learn.com), for creating personalised stories, and **If... The Emotional IQ Game** (ifyoucan.org), for growing confidence in social behaviour and attitude.

