CHAPTER

4

Taking a Closer Look at Assistive Technology Services

As defined in IDEA 2004, assistive technology service means:

…any service that directly assists a child with a disability in the selection, acquisition, or use of an assistive technology device. Such terms include:

(A) the evaluation of the needs of such child, including a functional evaluation of the child in the child's customary environment;

(B) purchasing, leasing, or otherwise providing for the acquisition of assistive technology devices by such child;

(C) selecting, designing, fitting, customizing, adapting, applying, maintaining, repairing, or replacing of assistive technology devices;

(D) coordinating and using other therapies, interventions, or services with assistive technology devices, such as those associated with existing education and rehabilitation plans and programs;

(E) training or technical assistance for such child, or, where appropriate, the family of such child; and

(F) training or technical assistance for professionals (including individuals providing education and rehabilitation services), employers, or other individuals who provide services to, employ, or are otherwise substantially involved in the major life functions of such child. [IDEA 2004, Part B, Section 612, (2)]

These examples illustrate the broad range of AT services that can be considered—all of which relate to supporting a student and those around that student in the selection, acquisition, and use of an AT device. AT services include a functional evaluation in the student's customary environments if the team decides that the evaluation would provide information needed to make decisions about the need for AT. Further, there are services that are related to the acquisition, maintenance, and coordinated support of AT devices as well as necessary training for the student, staff, parents, and others.

Frequently Asked Questions About AT Services

As IEP team members consider each student's possible need for AT they often have questions about AT services. Here are some of the most frequently asked questions and their answers.

Q. *Must AT services be provided by an AT specialist?*

No. Assistive technology services are broad and often are integrated into other services that the student receives (special education, speech/language, occupational and/or physical therapies, transition, etc.) and delivered by people with knowledge and skills in those areas. While it is important that the IEP team and all involved in the delivery of AT services understand how the technology is to be used to support the student's participation and progress in the general education curriculum, AT services are most effectively integrated into the educational program by many people who have different understanding, knowledge, and skills working together in a coordinated manner. This is why coordination of services is included as an assistive technology service.

Q. *Does every student require an AT evaluation?*

No. Although it is a requirement that every IEP team consider the possible need for AT devices and services in the development of the IEP, an evaluation may be needed only when the IEP team does not have the information necessary to make a decision about the child's need for AT or the nature and extent of the device and service addressed during the consideration process.

Q. *If an AT evaluation is needed, are there guidelines for where should it be conducted?*

Yes. The evaluation of a student's need for AT must be functional, practical, and conducted—at least in part—in each of the environments in which the student's educational activities take place or are expected to take place in the near future. Not only is this required by law, but it also is the primary way in which the specific areas where the student is having difficulty can be pinpointed so that needed supports and services can be identified.

Q. *Is it sufficient if an IEP team has the results of an evaluation that was conducted at a center away from school?*

No. Although recommendations from a center-based evaluation may provide useful information, the school district is still responsible for completing a functional evaluation in the child's customary educational environments. It is important to know specifically what impact the disabilities are having on how the student functions in typical learning environments and activities. The IEP team members need to review data from a variety of sources as they make appropriate decisions.

Q. *If a child receives an evaluation for an AT device at a private clinic, and the clinic recommends a specific device, is the school obligated to provide that device based solely on the clinic's recommendation?*

No. The school district must seek the parents' permission to evaluate and then conduct a functional evaluation to determine whether the student needs the particular device recommended to help increase, maintain, or improve functional capabilities related to participation and progress in education. Such an evaluation may take place over time, and it generally involves trial use of the recommended device in typical settings. It also may include use of other AT devices for comparison. The IEP team must then determine if the recommended device will be effective for the student in the school environment or, perhaps, if another device would be equally as effective and should be considered. Based on the additional data gathered during the functional evaluation, the IEP team may determine that the recommended device is needed, that another device would be more appropriate, or that the student does not need AT.

Q. *When an AT device is provided for a student, does the district have a continuing obligation for the adjustment and care of the device?*

Yes. It is not enough for a district to purchase a device and then hand it to school staff or to the student and the family. The district also must assure that the student can use the device effectively for its intended purpose. This means that ongoing AT services necessary to support use must be provided. Once an AT device has been selected and acquired, the law also requires that, if necessary, the device be designed, fitted, customized, or adapted to the specific needs of the student.

The district also is responsible for making sure a device that is required for educational purposes is maintained, repaired, or replaced as needed to ensure it will be available and in good working order when it is needed by the student. This is the legal responsibility of the district, whether the device is owned by the district or by the family.

Q. *Does the school need to provide training to parents and others in addition to the child and school staff?*

Yes. Both training and technical assistance must be provided to the child, the family, and any service provider who requires it. Training may include workshops, one-to-one training from a vendor or specialist, frequent follow up or inquiry from a specialist, or any of a variety of other types of education or technical assistance.

Q. *An AT device is being used in therapy sessions but the student is not yet ready to use the device for educational activities. Is this sufficient?*

No. The IEP team should ensure that a plan exists for instructing the student on how to use the device in every natural environment in which the AT is expected to be used. It is not enough for a student to have the opportunity to use AT occasionally (i.e., during therapy sessions) because that pattern of use is not likely to improve the student's functional capabilities. The student should be encouraged and supported in using AT throughout the day for the tasks for which it is intended. One of the AT services required by IDEA 2004 is the coordination of other services and therapies to ensure that the use of AT does not take place in a vacuum. Coordination and collaboration between all service providers and the family is usually essential to ensure

consistent use and integration of AT into daily activities. Coordination between general and special education teachers and instructional assistants also is crucial, because these people tend to have the most contact with a student throughout the school day and they can provide many opportunities for meaningful use of AT. While you cannot force a student to use the AT in every setting, there must be a plan and sufficient supports whenever and wherever the student may be using it.

Q. *Is training still required if the AT that is required is universally designed into available computers?*

Yes. While AT options built into available computers and other devices—often called accessibility options—may not need to be acquired and may not be difficult to implement, knowledge and understanding is still required to use these features successfully. Many students will be able to make the required adjustments independently, but others will need ongoing support from those around them. Teachers and others working with students must be able to manipulate computer preferences, seek out, download, and install readily available accessibility options such as a large cursor. Including training on how to do these things in general technology training for all teachers provides an excellent opportunity for instructional and AT specialists to work together.