

Technology helps kids learn to communicate

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Computers combining features from popular toys with innovative technology are helping improve the learning and communication skills of disabled children.

Penn State University researchers say they believe the technology could, in the future, be adapted to also assist victims of major accidents, as well as senior citizens.

Janice Light, a professor of communication sciences and disorders at Penn State, says more than 2 million Americans are unable to use speech to communicate, and children are a major component of that population.

"Kids learn and communicate through speech by trying out new words and forming sentences," said Light. "If they can't do that due to problems such as autism, Down syndrome and cerebral palsy, then it is going to be difficult to learn how to read and write, make friends and communicate their needs."

Light and colleagues are working on a five-year research grant to redesign assistive technology to improve the learning and communication abilities of such children. The key, she says, is to develop technology that's appealing to children, easy to learn and simple to operate.

Light presented her findings Monday during the annual meeting of the American Association for the Advancement of Science.

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