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How Technology Can Help Your Struggling Child Break Free and Learn

By Jennifer Zwiebel

Technology has opened up doors for many people in many arenas, and the field of education is no exception. From actual tools to online resources, there are ingenious ways to help struggling students find ways to learn, express themselves, and get organized. Of course, some technologies actually detract from a student's ability to learn a new skill or become independent, but when the options are well-chosen and balanced with non-technological tools and skills, you can open up a whole new world for your child.

Davey was a funny and endearing fifth grader when I met him. He had challenges including sitting in his chair during class, remembering his homework assignments, and staying focused during a conversation. My first objective was to get him organized, and the next was to find a way to help him capture the information that was eluding him in class.

We started by setting up a three-ring binder that contained his loose papers, nearly non-existent class notes and homework assignments. He was so proud of his new binder that he showed it off to his teacher, and used it happily and consistently. Next, I armed him with a small, child-friendly, portable word processor. Suddenly Davey was taking notes in class! He began to routinely back the notes up onto his computer at home and print them out so he

could study from them. This simple tool completely changed the way Davey received information in school and allowed him to make it his own. He was able to capture information and use it in a way that made sense to him, skipping the part of the process that made note-taking challenging for him. This is one of the great gifts of technology.

Writing

From taking notes in class to outlining and writing research papers, students can run into many difficulties. For some students writing can be challenging, both mentally and physically. Students with memory difficulties need to focus so hard on writing down whatever they can remember that they can lose their train of thought and any creativity that might have sparked along the way. Those students who have difficulties with the mechanics of writing can get caught up in trying to form letters, at the expense of the rest of the writing process.

For these students, a device that allows them to type or dictate removes these barriers to successful and creative writing. The Neo, a successor product by the same company that created Davey's word processor, is just the tool for the job (www.neo-direct.com). A thin, lightweight word processor, it's easy to take to school, ideal for note-taking and writing in-class assignments. It can be easily

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connected to a computer or printer, and has several assistive technology functions available, such as text-to-speech, word-prediction technology, and Slow Keys, for children with unsteady hands or difficulty in key targeting.

Older students can benefit greatly from using laptop computers in class for note-taking, since many kids can type more quickly than write. In addition, auto-formatting programs are helpful for creating outlines for reading notes and written assignments. Of course, simply using a computer to write an essay is incredibly helpful, from the ability to save multiple drafts and easily edit, to spell- and grammar-check capabilities. One danger lies in allowing kids to rely on spell-check exclusively because they lose the ability to work things out themselves, but the spell-check can be disabled.

While having documents on a hard drive makes it much easier to replace missing homework and reprint notes before a test, you **MUST** make it easy for your child to back up the information regularly! The best solution I've found is an online backup solution that backs the information up to an off-site server and can be programmed to backup automatically as frequently as you like. Many services offer free backup for a limited amount of information (try www.mozy.com and www.idrive.com).

Reading

Technology today has also made reading easier. Audio books are available on CD and as downloads for MP3 players. Some reading specialists recommend that students who struggle with reading listen to chapters *before* reading them, so they have an idea of what to expect, both in terms of story and language. This can be more effective than



listening while reading, which can become distracting and won't give your child as much room to learn on his own. You can find everything from children's books to textbooks at several online resources (www.listeninglibrary.com, www.audible.com, and www.rfbd.org, which offers free membership).

You can also download entire texts and even study notes to an iPod or iPhone. Students can read wherever they are without carrying around extra books and textbooks—plus they can listen to music while they study! Your child can download *The Catcher in the Rye* and the SparkNotes at www.ipreppress.com. Some texts come with both visual and audio. The Kindle is another lightweight (though pricey) option for downloading entire books, and it has an audio feature as well (www.amazon.com).

Homework, Time Management & Remembering to Do Stuff

Schools have been bringing powerful technology into their classrooms as well. Many developments have helped students receive information in a new way, although for struggling students problems are sometime exacerbated rather than relieved.

Smartboards, interactive whiteboards that allow teachers to connect to their computers and share information with students in class

and via email, are amazing tools. If, however, teachers email class notes home to students and students don't take notes as well, some kids will lose out on an important way of encoding information. While some children are mainly auditory learners, many are visual and tactile learners, and the process of writing notes helps them understand what they're learning as well as learn how to pick up on the relevant information.

Another technological advance with mixed results is the posting of homework assignments online. Many schools have their own websites where teachers post homework, sometimes an entire month, or even an entire semester, at a time. The big advantage is that children who don't write assignments down in class, or tend to lose their assignment pads, can now find out what the homework is without calling six different friends. It's also a good way for parents to check in on what's due and what's coming up that needs some attention.

The major downside is that kids don't get a lateral view of their homework. They see individual pages for each subject, and often only check what's due the next day. They may also check only one subject at a time, completing one assignment before even looking at what else is due and gauging how much time they'll need to complete all of their homework.

I strongly recommend that students transfer the information from the school website into a paper planner so they can see what they have to get done each evening (and the rest of the week, month, or longer, depending on which deadlines they've been given). I KNOW they hate to do this. Help them by doing it *for* them at first if that's what it takes. It really makes a difference. I have all my students use a teacher's planner, broken

down by subject and day, so they can lay out the week before them, see what's coming down the pike, and plan accordingly.

Older students who find deadlines, time management and remembering certain things challenging do really well with phones and PDAs (such as iPhones and Blackberries) that keep track of their schedules and tasks. Some find paper planners unwieldy, or helpful for long term planning but not everyday things that need to get done. They use the calendars on their PDAs for appointments and deadlines; text and email their teachers; set phone alarms as reminders to take their medication or meet a teacher after school; and rely on the "notes" function for to-do lists that include homework assignments.

Since their phones are generally with them all the time, it is much more likely that they'll remember what they're supposed to be doing. As long as they synch the information with a computer and back it up consistently, they're doing a great job making the technology work for them in a way that nothing else has.

Additional Online Resources & Software

In addition to the wonderful gadgets out there, there are a tremendous number of resources you can find online, and many are free. Here are a few sites you may find helpful:

- www.freeology.com (free graphic organizers and worksheets you can print or use online)
- www.edhelper.com (a paid-service that allows you to customize your own worksheets, starting at \$19.99/year)

- www.techmatrix.org (helps you find assistive technology tools for learning)
- www.inspiration.com (visual learning software that helps students think, brainstorm, organize, analyze and write)
- www.hwtears.com (a system for teaching handwriting to all students)

A Final Word (or Two)

Technology has created amazing options for struggling students, opening up space for them to think and create while sidestepping issues that usually trip them up. It is still important, however, to help them learn the basic skills they need, and to help them organize the non-technological elements of their lives. Your child will still bring home hundreds of loose sheets of paper that need to be corralled and sorted; she will still need to break down long-term assignments; and she will still need to empty out her backpack every now and then.

Let this be as easy and non-judgmental a process as possible. Organizing is as much a learnable skill as reading and writing (and texting!). Creating a simple maintenance system with your child will serve her now and well into the future. And, just as you want to introduce new ways of doing things in a supportive and encouraging way, introduce new technology to your child in a way in which there is no stigma attached.

It is key to make sure your child understands that *everyone* learns differently and that this process is simply about finding the tools that work best for *her*. It involves playing around with different options and practicing. Reinforce the fact that everyone has different strengths and challenges, and you want to joyfully support your child as she figures out how she can best make herself heard.



Jennifer Zwiebel is a Professional Organizer and Coach who partners with students to help them discover systems that will work for them, both in their space and in their minds. By teaching time management and organizational skills through hands-on work and by providing consistent support for her clients, she helps them live, work and think more clearly. Jennifer is the co-author of *The Organized Student: Teaching Children the Skills for Success in School and Beyond* (www.jenniferzwiebel.com).