



Palm Handhelds Touch Students with Autism

A Texas district uses handhelds to motivate students with Asperger's syndrome

BY KEVIN BUTLER

Special education teacher Lynn Parsons had some encouragement for a mother that doubted that her high-school daughter would be interested in attending the teacher's after-school social-skills class for students with high-functioning autism or Asperger's syndrome.

"I said, 'Bring her, and watch when we pass out the Palm handhelds,'" recalls Parsons, who works at a high school in the Birdville Independent School District, located near Ft. Worth. The twelve high school students in Parsons' class use the color-screen computerized devices to write stories and

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essays, take pictures and notes, draw, shoot videos and make voice-recordings.

Those activities not only keep the students interested in the class, Parsons says, they also keep kids talking with each other and outside peers. As the students show off their work and educate each other on newly discovered features of the devices, they learn more social skills, she says. She cites as an example an assignment she gave students to use the devices to take pictures of their pets and show the photographs to one another. "That gets them to communicate, because now they are discussing their pets and they are having back-and-forth conversations and they are asking appropriate questions," says Parsons, who heads Birdville High School's special education department.

For the duration of the course, the students get to keep the Palm computing devices, which they carry to other classes and sometimes use to take notes, usually combined with a small keyboard that connects wirelessly to the device. The devices also allow the students to plan their daily activities through electronic calendars. Such planning can help them keep track of the kinds of schedule changes that traditionally have been upsetting to students with autism or Asperger's.

For example, if there is a pep rally the next week that alters the



regular class schedule, the handheld-users can be reminded of it and be psychologically prepared for changes, Parsons says. "It really lowers the students' frustration level," she says.

Since Ramona Knapp's 14-year-old daughter received the device, she has been able to keep track of appointments, which reduces her mother's need to make frequent reminders. Her daughter feels more in control, Knapp says.

"So instead of me telling her all the time what to do and when to do it, she can rely on her Palm handheld for that, which makes her far more independent," she says.

Knapp also feels that the devices encourage socialization. "It's something they can interact with and talk about," she says. The devices also spur the students

to interact socially with students outside special education, who are immediately interested in learning more about the Palm handhelds from Parsons' students, the teacher says. The technology easily draws them into conversations. "Students with autism have trouble fitting in socially," Parsons says. "When they get out their handheld in the classroom, they are the cool ones."

Students in Parsons' class also use the technology to write personal stories sharing their daily experiences — including frustrations — living with their medical condition, Parsons says. Venting that frustration can potentially prevent disruptive acting-out behaviors, such as hitting. "If you keep a student from acting out and hitting another student, it's very therapeutic," she says.



Parsons is planning to have the students make handheld voice recordings about their daily activities. She hopes to make the recordings available for listening on the school district's Web site to educate others' about autism and Asperger's. "People need to understand what it's like to have to deal with it and what better way than to have them put it in their own words and have other people listen to it," Parsons says.

This isn't the first time the school district has experimented with Palm handhelds among students with autism Parsons says. A few years ago, the district distributed about 50 Palm handheld units to students with autism and Asperger's to help them organize their schedules and assignments, she says. Parsons early this year received newer color Palm handhelds. "Nothing I had ever done before in the classroom motivated

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students like this," she says.

She used the newer Palm units differently, this time as a specific social tool. For example, she has

instructed kids to take pictures of other students in order to learn their names. The color screens and added functions, such as video and pictures, represent a vast improvement over the earlier handheld devices, she says. Parsons adds she and other teachers have seen clear benefits from the technology. Example: one particularly shy student, who had trouble talking and rarely asks for help, walked up to a teacher in another class asking if she could take notes over the Palm handheld. "The other teacher and I just stood there with our mouths open, because she doesn't assert herself and she never wanted to take notes," Parsons says.

Parsons has some advice for other school districts wishing to start similar programs, including properly training teachers to use the technology. Some Birdville teachers received four hours of training on the Palm units and had a couple of weeks to adjust to the devices, she says. The teacher also has parents come in for the last 15 minutes of the class session in which the Palm units are first distributed to the students. Parents sign agreements that if the child loses or destroys the device, parents must pay replacement costs, although if it's stolen on school property, district insurance should cover it, Parsons says. The Palm handheld computing devices are returned to the teacher at the end of the course. ■