Tech tools help parents, teachers overcome autism's hurdles

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When I was a young woman raising my son with autism in the 1990s, we had a home computer. It was considered a luxury item then, but for us it was essential, helping us to connect with other people involved in the early days of the disability rights movement and with other families affected by autism.

Today, technology has become more sophisticated and offers a myriad of ways to improve the lives of people on the spectrum. Over the past few years, I have used — and in some cases, helped develop — a number of Web-based courses for people on the spectrum, their families and autism professionals. Some courses train professionals to deliver treatments. Others help affected individuals transition into adulthood, coach families through diagnosis and treatment or assist teachers in managing the behaviors of special-needs students.

I have come to rely on many technological tools for my own family's needs, from taking online courses to using applications that support my son's daily living.

Among my favorites is an online education service called Relias Learning, which offers **Web-based training in autism treatments** for healthcare professionals and caregivers. Relias' library includes 90 courses on evidence-based behavioral and educational treatments. In the past year, more than 22,000 people have completed at least one of these courses, which are self-paced. One of the most popular offerings is **Autism and Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA)**, in which a therapist identifies the source of challenging behaviors and redirects the person toward more functional social interaction.

In the courses, documentary-style videos teach the ins and outs of a variety of behavioral interventions, showing how specific support strategies assist real people with autism and their caregivers. Using Relias, schools and Medicaid service providers can move expensive on-site professional training online, giving support staff the necessary training hours in a flexible, cost-

effective manner.

Family-friendly:

Another education technology firm, called the **Houlton Institute**, is one of the few online providers to offer courses aimed at helping adults with autism find their path in life — a topic I am passionate about. The firm's 'Transitions' course includes assignments, activities and discussion forums focusing on the shift into adulthood. Preparing for the world of work is an important feature of the course.

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The company's 'Building Independence for Living Training' course, which I co-developed, teaches parents, teachers and support professionals evidence-based therapies to assist adults with autism in developing greater independence in daily living. In these courses, autism experts are online, moderating group discussions surrounding projects such as building a portfolio of supports for an adult with autism.

An online teaching tool called MyEdGPS, for which I have developed webinars, provides **guidance to families in navigating** the medical and educational institutions set up to help a child who has autism or intellectual disability.

The tool serves as both advocate and adviser, providing information about how autism is diagnosed as well as advice on working with schools to get services for a child. Webinars and online tools help parents prepare for meetings about individual education plans with the school district, develop talking points for those meetings and learn advocacy skills. The tool also describes the latest interventions and offers one-on-one counseling support to caregivers by phone. One advantage of MyEdGPS is that it helps families evaluate intervention options aside from ABA, such as the **Early Start Denver Model**.

The resource has found a niche within the corporate sector, with some 500,000 employees who have children with autism or other developmental conditions receiving it as part of their benefits package.

Teaching tool:

Rethink is an online library of more than 1,500 video-based **exercises, lesson plans and printable materials** relevant to educating children on the spectrum, designed for teachers and parents. With an emphasis on **ABA in the classroom,** exercises include demos of strategies for mitigating difficult behaviors of school-aged children with autism that can get in the way of their education. Its data analytics tools are particularly valuable for busy teachers tasked with implementing state standards for the classroom while also documenting progress for students on the spectrum.

It's astounding to think back to more than 20 years ago, when I discovered the power of the Internet. It gave me access to the first listservs on which geeky parents of children with autism just like me shared their hopes and fears. Now the Internet is a vehicle for efficiently sharing tools that can give people the information they need to do their jobs well or navigate the complexities of our society.