An international survey of parental attitudes to technology use by their autistic children at home

Paper summary

It is assumed that autistic people are frequent users of technology, and have particular skills when it comes to using different types of technology. Technology is one area in which many supports have been developed specifically for autistic people (e.g. PECS on an iPad), but less is known about whether and how autistic people use technology at home outside of an educational context. We asked parents of autistic children about their child’s use of technology at home, to explore what types of devices their child was using, which activities or software they were using on their device, the time they spent using technology, and whether parents had any concerns about their child’s use of technology.

We collected data from a range of families, including families from across Europe (UK, Spain, and Belgium), families with young preschool-aged children and adult children who had grown up, families with children who had learning disabilities and families with children across a range of reading and writing abilities. We compared patterns of technology use and found a similar pattern across child profiles regarding types of technology and time spent using technology. However, higher skills in reading and writing were associated with children being able to use more devices and interfaces.

One of our main findings was the range of technologies which autistic children reportedly used in the home, from iPads and other tablets, to games consoles such as the Wii. We did not find much report of children using apps or technologies specifically designed for autistic people, and did not find a high rate of the use of augmented and alternative communication (AAC) devices. Instead, parents talked about how their child enjoyed playing video games, watching videos on YouTube, listening to music, and doing independent research on the internet.

We found that parents had concerns about the amount of time that their child spent using technology. Level of concern about screen time was associated with parents reporting that their child spent longer using devices.

In conclusion, we found that autistic children use a wide range of technology and use technology for a broad range of leisure purposes. Whilst some parents had concerns about their child’s technology use, many reported the benefits of their child using technology to direct their own learning. We think this paper is important for looking further into the indirect benefits of technology use in autistic children, and exploring family barriers to accessing technology-based supports such as AAC.