



Technology to help autistic children

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UNDATED (WJRT) -- (10/20/10) -- New age technology tapping into the minds of autistic children, helping them get more out of life.

HealthFirst reporter Leslie Toldo takes us to Spain and back to look at the high tech help Autism therapies.

The number of kids born with Autism goes up 10 to 20 percent each year. These new technologies bridge communication gaps, which not only helps autistics, but the families who love them.

Speaking is one way to communicate, but interaction may be a better option, especially for kids with autism.

"It's a system to help people communicate with another people," said Maria Jose Rodrigues Fortiz from System Informatics at the University of Granada.

This scout program in Spain relies on special video gaming systems like this Nintendo DS. Kids can learn basic tasks as well as telling teachers what they want to do, all by touching this screen. A study in 16 Spanish schools found the program decreased outbursts and improved overall behavior.

"They are less aggressive because they can communicate," Rodrigues Fortiz said.

The 20 brain balance centers in the U.S. offer a slightly different approach.

"The fundamental issue in these kids is that both hemispheres are not linking up," Norwalk, Connecticut Brain Balance Center Executive Director Mark Goldenberg said.

Emily Kissa has a form of sensory processing disorder. One brain hemisphere is weaker than the other.

Goldenberg uses these goggles and exercise to stimulate her vision, balance and hearing. The goal is to strengthen that weakness through therapy three times a week, and better nutrition.

"We feel like she's really come a very long way and sort of gotten to the place we thought she could get to," Emily's mother, Wendy Sue Kissa, said.

Researchers say video games and robots work better for kids because they're more predictable and consistent than humans.

BACKGROUND: Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is a range of complex neurodevelopment disorders, characterized by social impairments, communication difficulties, and restricted, repetitive, and stereotyped patterns of behavior. Autistic disorder, sometimes called autism or classical ASD, is the most severe form of ASD. It varies widely in severity and symptoms and may go unrecognized, especially in mildly affected children or when it's masked by more debilitating handicaps. Health care providers will often use a questionnaire or other screening instrument to gather information about a child's development and behavior. There is no cure for ASD. Therapies and behavioral interventions are designed to remedy specific symptoms and can bring about substantial improvement. The ideal treatment plan coordinates therapies and interventions that meet the specific needs of individual children. Most health care professionals agree that the earlier the intervention, the better. (Source: national Institute of Neurological Disorders and Stroke)

WAIT, YOU WANT MY CHILD TO PLAY VIDEO GAMES?: Researchers around the world are creating video games to study cognitive skills in children with autism using a revolutionary interface: gesture recognition software that registers the players' movements and transfers them to the screen. The programs use photos, sounds and positive feedback as part of a scoring system to encourage autistic children to learn. At issue is the importance of developing personal relationships and becoming a part of society. While video games can be educational and entertaining, their reputation as a solitary activity can present an impediment to progress for people with autistic disorders by limiting their exposure to social situations. Researchers are also concerned that playing video games could become one of the many repetitive activities that an affected child engages in. (SOURCE: BrainBalanceCenters.com; Lowry, Donna. Brain Balance Helps Kids With Autism; Loftus, Tom. Virtual World Teaches Real-World Skills)

BRAIN BALANCE: Brain Balance is a program designed to help kids with functional disconnections overcome challenges. The Brain Balance approach seeks to strengthen either the right hemisphere of the brain for neurological disorders such as autism and ADHD or the left side of the brain for obsessive-compulsive disorder and dyslexia. The centers treat everything from diet to physical, sensory to academic areas. Three months of treatment in the program would cost on average over six thousand dollars.

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