



BRIDGING APPS

MAKING SENSE OF TECHNOLOGY

By Reji Mathew, PhD

The outpouring of emotion for the passing of tech genius Steve Jobs is validation of how much the magic of digital devices has become a central part of our daily lives. Phones and tablets are lifestyle managers, offering apps that help with organization, planning for dinner, or checking one's budget. Jobs will be remembered as a central inspiration for the digital age, but how people continue to make creative use of digital technologies is the post-Jobs story.

BridgingApps is a cutting edge Web community of parents and professionals who seek to share information on ways to use educational/therapy apps on the latest technology devices—iPad, iPhone, iPod, Android and others—to support developmental learning goals for people with disabilities. Cristen Reat and Sami Rahman co-founded BridgingApps after meeting at a weekly parenting support group that explores the use of digital tools for children with special needs in Houston, Texas. “This started out of a need for an organizational structure,” said Rahman. “There are over 40,000 educational apps out in the market now. An app saying it’s designed for grades 2-3 does not provide much information on how it can be helpful.”

BridgingApps is parent-driven, offering detailed reviews on apps by skill—not diagnosis—such as color recognition, social interaction,

and language arts. “We wanted to keep the focus on skills, as we know that each person is unique in his or her strengths and needs certain types of support. Many of the apps can be downloaded on Apple and Android tablets. Devices will keep changing over time, but not the skills,” said Reat.

Rahman and Reat are believers in the benefits of apps, because they both are parents of children with special needs and have seen positive results. Reat experimented with adaptive computer mice for her son, Vincent, age 6, who has Down syndrome. “Vincent was reluctant to hold a pencil due to his fine and gross motor issues. We tried the *iWriteWords* app on the iPad. He began to trace letters with his fingers; it had an immediate cause-and-effect response with musical rewards. After a few weeks, he became motivated to use his hands and began using a stylus, which then transferred to using a pencil.” Rahman

had similar success with his son, Noah, age 2, who has Cerebral Palsy. “Noah made gains in his speech through one of his favorite apps, *Monkey Preschool Lunchbox*. He also responded to the interactive nature of the app, and in addition, it helped with his finger isolation skills.”

Finding a useful and appropriate app for particular situations can be time consuming and overwhelming. Searching for apps by skill, such as “expressive language” or “finger isolation” in iTunes or Android Market does not yield results that are helpful. Frustrated with this problem, Rahman designed a solution that would allow users to target their search by specific attributes and skill. The result is a powerful tool called “Insignio.” With Insignio, users can create and organize apps in a list, add notes to each app in a list, comment and rate apps, and be directed to Android Market and iTunes stores to purchase apps. By saving searches, users don’t have to redo their work and can see what’s new at the click of a button.

While Rahman and Reat are passionate about how apps can enhance learning, they have their caveats. “There are no magic bullets when your child has special needs,” said Rahman. “Progress is accomplished by 1,000 little tasks; digital tools alone are not the solution. We view apps as one part of the therapeutic team approach on behalf of your child.”

Reat cautioned, “We also don’t encourage parents to run out and buy a device. Take a step back, ask a few questions: What do you want a device for? What skills are you trying to improve? What goals do you have? Once you find answers to these questions, then decide on the best device for your child.” Reat added that it is critical to have client buy-in. “You can’t hand a device to a child and leave; there needs to be support for the child around that device.”

Just over a year old, BridgingApps has undergone impressive growth. The community has partnered with Easter Seals Greater Houston and the Web site is accessible in multiple languages. Bridging Apps offers



Cristen Reat and her son Vincent



Sami Rahman and his son Noah

a directory of funding sources for devices, a Facebook page, and a forthcoming checklist on goals and expectations to use when deciding what type of device to purchase.

If you are interested in joining the BridgingApps community, you can register with the site, which allows access to maximize use of the app search tool Insignio, community boards, and forums. You can share a success story, read helpful articles, and connect with other users of mobile devices. BridgingApps continues to build momentum, and Rahman and Reat hope to expand the BridgingApps support meetings around the world.

Dr. Reji Mathew is a psychotherapist/clinical instructor at New York University. She is a disability advocate and freelance writer. The main focus of her work is to promote coping skills education for persons with chronic illness and disability. Her clinical expertise is in integrative psychotherapy, particularly cognitive-behavioral skills training. Reach her via e-mail at her Web site: rejimathewwriter.com.

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