

Using the 'TapToTalk' app on the mainstream Nintendo DS range

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'TapToTalk' is a software app created for the Nintendo DS Lite, DSi or DSi XL, and is comparable to a handheld dynamic screen communication aid. It is available from www.taptotalk.com where you can view demos and link to tutorials on You Tube etc.

It costs \$99.95 for a home yearly subscription. There are different rates for home (1 child) Pro (2 or more children) and Agency (for 5 or more children)

This subscription includes online access to 'TapToTalk Designer,' the TapToTalk Nintendo app, the TapToTalk Web app and the Starter Kit. The Starter Kit includes a game cartridge, microSD card, a USB adapter for the microSD card and an SD adapter for the microSD card. This could be off putting to people who like to buy a 'one off' product. However, it might take the pressure off people in making the 'perfect AAC decision' and encourage them to try it and see if it works for them. There is also a 30 day return policy. Software upgrades will be available automatically through the subscription.

To communicate, the user simply taps the chosen picture on the DS Lite's bottom touch-screen with their finger or stylus to make it speak the word or sentence and appear on the top screen. The DS Lite has 3" screens. You need to have fairly good fine motor skills to access the screen and some of the DS control buttons which are used to navigate the pages and change settings.

E.g. you can turn text on and off with "A" sound on and off with "X" and replay a sound with "B" on the control buttons. You also use any button on the cross to navigate back to 'home.' The start button enables you to change between albums on the DS.



The software comes with a large bank of over 2000 pictures, and can be fully customised to contain the user's own pictures, photos and messages.

If you want to use symbols, you need to either subscribe online to SymbolStix or import your PCS/Widgit symbols as jpegs.

Sets of pictures, or 'albums' are customised on 'TapToTalk Designer' (accessed via the Internet), and then transferred to the DS via an SD card or 'cartridge.' You are not able to do any of the programming on the device, however if it is being used by autistic children, this could be seen as an advantage. It also means that if a device gets damaged or lost, the latest complete version of the pages is online, ready to be downloaded again. The device itself is also

easily replaceable and affordable. In addition, you can also access the pages remotely from any computer linked to the internet, which could be good on a touch screen computer or tablet PC, if the person needs a larger platform than the DS range.

Symbols

- You need to be a SymbolStix Online paid subscriber to import symbols directly into 'TapToTalk Designer.'
- PCS metafiles are .wmf files, which are invalid when you try to import them. You have to copy your symbols from Boardmaker to Irfanview/Paint and save them as jpgs, and then import them into your picture library.
- Widgit symbols are .emf files which are also invalid. It is recommended to put them into Windows Explorer, and save them as a Bitmap .bmp files, then import them.
- You can also copy the Widgit symbols to Irfanview from e.g. Boardmaker and save them as jpegs, then import them.

Photos and Pictures

- The picture size is limited to 2MB photos (you may therefore need to resize your pictures)
- It takes jpg, gif and png files. They all get converted to jpg when imported into the picture library.

There are many advantages of this software: TapToTalk is low cost, fully customisable and the fact that it works on the DS range means that the user is likely to feel less self-conscious about using it as it has a 'cool' factor. The DS itself is fairly robust, suited to small hands, and has a decent battery life of 19 hours. It can also be used whilst charging from the mains.



However, its volume is not loud enough for functional communication. The DS Lite requires external speakers such as 'DS Grip Speakers' to make the voice output audible for everyday use. The sound quality when you record your own messages for the device is particularly poor.

Sounds and Recordings

- Uses wav or MP3 files up to 2MB, or you can record your own sounds/messages. Recording your sounds in Audacity first is recommended for best sound quality www.audacity.com although it does not make a huge difference.
- You have to record or import messages in 'TapToTalk Designer' as you cannot record directly into the DS Lite.
- If you want to re-record the message linked to a picture, it automatically updates your Tap To Talk pages or 'Outline levels' which are using this picture already with the new recording, which is good.

- However, even if your recordings sound really loud and clear on the computer through headphones, the sound quality from a DS Lite is very poor and it sounds like a whisper, even at full volume, without external amplification.

TapToTalk can also be put on the DSi, which has a built-in camera, mic and five brightness settings. It is also slightly larger with 3.25" screens. The latest version - DSi XL - has 4.2" screens, and a larger 'pen sized' stylus. Both of these are marginally more expensive but promise 'enhanced sound.'

When it comes to programming, the 'TapToTalk Designer' software does not seem very intuitive for those used to 'conventional communication aids. It does take some time to get your head around the 'designing of pages.' However, if you are coming to it without much other AAC experience, that might not be an issue.

Below is a 'glossary' of terms in the language of 'TapToTalk' and some points about how the Tap To Talk album's layout can be set up for the user.

Glossary

- A 'Tap to Talk' is the name for a person's 'set of albums'
- 'Albums' are like page-sets e.g. 'home' 'school' 'college'
- A 'Tap To Talk' cartridge can hold up to 10 albums at a time.
- The 'Album outline' is a list of the topic pages within the page-set.
- An 'Outline level' is a topic page e.g. fruit, sports
- The 'caption' is the 'label' on a button. That's the only text that appears on the DS and is limited in the number of characters.

Layout

- On each 'Outline level' you can have up to 12 pictures
- You can have only up to 10 outline levels in an album (limiting the amount of vocabulary)
- If you have 1 button on a page it's like a sequence of steps or set of instructions (e.g. visual prompt sequence)
- If you have 2 to 3 buttons on a page they appear side by side along the top of the screen
- When you add a 4th, it becomes 2 rows of 3 buttons.
- Once you add a 7th button, it becomes 3 rows of 4 buttons, up to the maximum 12 buttons.

As well as the 'Nintendo app' there is a 'Web app' which enables you to access your 'TapToTalk' from other computers.

'TapToTalk' Web App

- You can access your TapToTalk albums from any computer with internet connection and a web browser
- You go to <http://tnt.mytaptotalk.com> then type in your TapToTalk ID and password (which you can find when you go to 'Publish TapToTalk' and select 'Web app' from your Nintendo app page.) It shows you a long number then a password.
- It's good for computers with a touch-screen and tablet PCs; if users need access to a larger screen than a DS.
- It also works with a PC and mouse (SLTs/others can then access it remotely)
- The web app albums are on servers, so you don't need to download them to your computer.
- You can print all the pictures in an album using the print icon in the web app. These can then be used for teaching exercises/low-tech practise.

To conclude, 'TapToTalk' could be a good option for users who need a simple picture layout, without text options and who respond to the 'mainstream' popularity of the DS. However, the sound quality needs to be really improved before it will be really useful as a communication aid, as at the moment it would not be heard well whilst 'out and about.' It will be interesting to follow its progress when any upgrades become available and to see if the creators of the app will be responsive to suggested changes by parents and professionals.

Possible speakers for Nintendo DS range



Gamexpert speaker for Nintendo DS Lite (£7.50 from Amazon)



Pink Speaker Stand for DS Lite (£12.79 from www.overstock.com)



Sound Grip Speakers for Nintendo DS Lite (£6.91 from Amazon)



Cygnett GrooveBassBall portable speaker (£16.06 from Amazon) a mono speaker with an expandable design delivering dynamic sound and bass. Rechargeable 3 hour battery. (Recommended by Assistyx LLC, the TapToTalk Company)