

**11/21/2012**

## **A safe place online for children with autism and other disabilities**

**For tech-savvy children**, teens and young adults with autism spectrum disorders, the internet can be both a refuge and a peril.

It can be a source of fascinating information, escape and entertainment. But it can also lead to social isolation and cyber bullying.

[Ability Online](#), a monitored social network, allows young people with disabilities, chronic illnesses or other challenges to connect with friends, share stories and updates, and most of all feel included.

No other organization offers a program where the child can be in the safety of their home, using a computer or tablet, to interact with other children facing similar challenges, says Executive Director Michelle McClure.

“Instead of isolating a child with autism who understands they are different from the other kids, here they feel like they can finally fit in and be themselves,” she says.

The free, Toronto-based service which just celebrated its 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary, has helped more than 40,000 registered members since its inception, including 2,000 current active members. Most come from Canada, with about 23 per cent from the United States and about 2 per cent from the United Kingdom and Australia.

In addition to fostering friendships among children, the service partners with 200 health-care organizations that provide support to parents, teachers and professionals.

Each group of adults has their own special homepage where they can participate in forums, share resources and support each other, McClure says.

Meantime, homepages for children offer online mentoring, tutoring and job coaching.

A special friendship-builder portal for children with autism provides online role-playing, forums and problem-solving.

For autistic children, it's about fitting in, getting support from others who face similar challenges, talking about what works and what doesn't, and learning from each other while making friends on-line.

"It's a wonderful opportunity for these children to practise real-life social situations in a safe and supportive environment," McClure says. "It is a place where disability really disappears."

Posted by Laurie Monsebraaten at 11:25:26 AM