

# New app for iPhone to help autistic children

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THE IPHONE is set to become a communication tool for children with autism, with the testing of a new application for the device.

The application is designed to be used in a similar way to the Picture Exchange Communication System (Pecs), which allows children to build sentences using a book of laminated pictures attached to a board by Velcro.

The application, which is being developed under the working title Grace, is the brainchild of Lisa Domican, a parent of two children with autism. She was inspired by O2's marketing campaign for the iPhone. Before the launch of the device in 2008, the mobile operator ran advertisements on buses in Dublin. Ms Domican noticed the advertisements and realised the phone's potential as an alternative to the Pecs books used by her 10-year-old daughter, Grace.

"You are constantly having to replace loose cards and make new ones," said Ms Domican. "With the iPhone, the screen looks like a Pecs book. It's ok to have a four-year-old walking around with a Pecs book; it's not ok for a 10 or 12-year-old. They're very personal to the kids; it's their voice. The [Pecs books] really stand out, whereas the iPhone is discreet and always there."

The idea is backed by O2 Ireland, which supplied the devices for the development and testing of the application. The mobile network is already involved with Irish Autism Action and it was through this link that Ms Domican got backing from O2.

Ms Domican linked up with Steven Troughton-Smith, a software developer for the iPhone who has created a number of bestselling applications.

Mr Troughton-Smith, a student at Dublin City University, took the description of what Ms Domican wanted and turned it into a working version of Grace.

He developed the application to look exactly like a Pecs book. So instead of carrying around a Pecs book, older children can use the iPhone to choose from a range of pictures and place them on a virtual strip of Velcro.

Ms Domican's daughter Grace has become so comfortable with the technology that she adds her own photos to the application's library using the iPhone's camera.

The application is undergoing trials on five devices in three schools to see if other children, parents and tutors can use it easily. Once testing has been completed, it will be submitted to the iPhone App Store.

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