

MIZZOU

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MEDIA OF THE FUTURE



iSocial studies

Students with autism are learning online

On your daily travels through office halls, grocery aisles or traffic jams, you might interpret thousands of facial expressions. But how would you react if a passerby suddenly seemed angry or hostile? Although children with autism sometimes struggle to discern mood from facial expression, a new virtual learning environment is helping.



Students can interact with teachers and other students through iSocial's virtual reality.

Developed by Janine Stichter, professor of education, and Jim Laffey, professor of information science and learning technologies, iSocial is a 3-D virtual world that allows students who may not have access to traditional face-to-face social competence instruction to experience learning with others online.

“A lot of our individuals [with autism], despite having normal or above-normal IQs, tend to only recognize facial expressions or emotions that represent angry or happy — a pretty stark continuum,” Stichter says. “If you give them an inquisitive look, they may misperceive it as angry.”

Recognizing facial expressions is just one unit of the program’s curriculum designed to increase social competency. Others include sharing ideas, conversation pragmatics and problem solving. It’s based on Stichter’s face-to-face curriculum, which has demonstrated

significant improvement for students across multiple measures based on parent and teacher review.

Graphically, the 3-D learning environment has been compared to popular games such as *Second Life* and *The Sims*. It's a hit with research participants, and iSocial will debut in Columbia's middle schools and junior highs in fall 2011.




"Oftentimes school districts with limited resources, including more rural communities, don't have access to face-to-face programming in group formats," Stichter says.

"iSocial provides this opportunity."

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