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Robots being used as classroom buddies for children with autism

Posted on Thursday 8th November 2012

Robots are being used as classroom buddies for children with autism in a groundbreaking initiative that aims to improve social interaction and communication.

Max and Ben, two knee-high humanoid robots that can dance to “Thriller”, play games and emulate Tai Chi, are to be showcased by researchers at the University of Birmingham as part of the ESRC festival of Social Sciences.

The Aldebaran robots, which have been trialled by pupils at Topcliffe Primary School in Castle Vale, Birmingham since March, are the latest in a range of innovative technologies that will be on display at the school tomorrow (Thurs 8th November).

The event is about using technologies to help children with autism. Children, teachers and researchers will demonstrate the latest technologies and share their experiences of using them in the classroom.

Dr Karen Guldberg, from the University of Birmingham’s School of Education, said: “We have been looking at how technology can support pupils with autism to communicate more effectively.

“Pupils and teachers are experimenting with the robots and other technologies in a developmental way and they are showing significant benefits for the classroom. The robots have been modelling good behaviour and acting as buddies.”

Research shows that children with autism often find computers and technology safe, motivating and engaging, particularly in the areas of social interaction and communication.

Ian Lowe, headteacher at Topcliffe Primary, said: “The robots have been brilliant at supporting autistic children with their learning. You can program them to teach language, play games and model behaviour. We have even used them in assemblies. In the future we are looking to see if they can be used to support learning not just at school but at home as well.”

Aldebaran robotics are world leaders in the development of a humanoid robot. Topcliffe have hosted two robots in their classrooms since March 2012.

The Festival of Social Science is run by the Economic and Social Research Council which runs from 3-10 November 2012. With events from some of the country’s leading social scientists, the Festival celebrates the very best of British social science research and how it influences our social, economic and political lives - both now and in the future.

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