



Apps for young children

WHAT IS AN APP?

The word “app” is short for “application” and in its current use, refers to a software program used on a smartphone or mobile device such as the Android, iPhone, BlackBerry or iPad. **These devices allow young children access to a huge range of activities and games and are increasingly being used by very young children. While young children may not have their own mobile devices, surveys show that parents often pass over their own devices to children.**

Parents reportedly do this for two reasons:

- to occupy and quieten children while involved in activities such as queuing or travelling
- many parents believe that touch devices are an educational tool and are therefore searching for ‘educational’ apps to install.

Teachers of young children are also increasingly seeing mobile devices as useful teaching tools because they allow young children to manipulate and interact with screen objects and create content without requiring the fine motor skills needed to operate a traditional computer.

CHOOSING APPS

Faced with the huge and ever-increasing choice of apps available - numbering now in the hundreds of thousands - parents (and teachers) may feel overwhelmed and confused.

What does “educational mean?”

Many apps designed for children are marketed as ‘educational’ but there seem to be no agreed criteria for what makes an app educational.

- Many of those labeled educational are what can be seen as “drill and practice” activities. These have closed activities with a predetermined task and “correct” response and are instructive rather than interactive. They include many simple maths, spelling and reading apps.
- Children tend to lose interest in these instructive apps quite quickly and their use should be kept to a minimum.
- Remember - children can learn important reading, writing and maths skills by being involved in everyday activities such as cooking and shopping with you, or by having stories read to them.

What apps are best?

The most valuable apps are those that give children a chance to experiment and try out their own ideas – for example, some allow them to create drawings or music.

- These apps are beneficial to children’s development because they allow real play – play that is enjoyable, that requires active involvement, is free of external rules and that focusses on the process not product. Children learn through this type of play and the best early childhood education involves this type of play.
- Apps which enable your child to discover new information by free exploration are also valuable.

WHAT TO WATCH OUT FOR

As with any technology, active parent involvement is strongly encouraged when children are using a mobile device. Although using your phone or iPad to occupy children while you get on with other things may at times seem unavoidable, make sure that you know exactly what your children are doing when they are playing alone.

Look at content

Written and produced by



Some apps may appear on the surface as if they are appropriate for young children but may have content that you find problematic. For example, how would you feel about an app which appears to teach number skills, but is set in a gambling context and includes poker machine sound effects? ...or an app which looks like a kids game because it involves a wooden puppet-like figure, but gives the user a chance to torture the figure with a choice of methods?

Set parental controls for content

Check out the parental controls available on your device – you can do this in the instruction manual or on the company website. You may be able to restrict internet access and limit the type of apps which can be downloaded. For example, see:

<http://www.pbs.org/parents/childrenandmedia/article-set-parental-controls-iphone.html>

Turn off in-app purchasing

- In app purchasing allows you to buy additional features such as game expansions and character upgrades.
- Young children playing a game may make in-app purchases, often inadvertently, which may result in a rather nasty shock for parents when bills come in.
- It is important, but simple, to turn off the in-app purchases facility before passing devices over to children to make sure that this can't happen.

In-app purchasing can be turned off in the general settings on your device, for example see:

<http://www.accc.gov.au/consumers/internet-phone/in-app-purchases>

Limit screen time

- It is important to remember that even when they are involved with the best content available, young children need to spend limited amounts of time with screens.
- It is more important to have time for physical activity, to play with toys, to explore the natural environment and to interact with other children and adults.
- Current recommendations, based on the American Academy of Pediatrics' guidelines, state that children under two should have no screen time. For children aged over two the current recommendations are for 1-2 hours of quality screen time per day (this includes all screens – including mobile devices).

APP REVIEWS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Sites that review and recommend apps include:

ACCM *Know Before You Load* www.childrenandmedia.org.au/app-reviews/

A Matter of App <http://childrensappreview.blogspot.com.au>

Common Sense Media <http://www.commonsensemedia.org/learning-ratings>

CSM 'Best of' lists <http://www.commonsensemedia.org/mobile-app-lists>

Every Chance to Learn <http://nizn.com.au/2012/08/appolutely-amazing-apps-for-preschoolers/>

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