

Plugged in

Technology has an important role to play in the early years, explains **Fiona Joines** in the first part of this four part series

The first part of this series is about setting the context and thinking about how using technology fits within the early years sector. I talk about relevant theory and recent research that sets the scene along with links to the EYFS (despite) technology no longer having an Early Learning Goal linked to it.

SOCIAL LEARNING THEORY

We are social creatures, and being with others, making connections and learning from, with and around others comes naturally. We see this in children; how they watch others, copy behaviours and play alongside each other. We also notice how even very young children use technology, touching screen devices such as smartphones and tablets seemingly with an instinct that can feel jarring for some adults.

But, for the most part, they have learnt how to use these devices because from the day they were born, the older children and adults around them were using them. The people that care for them and love them, who they spend their whole lives with, are on these devices, sometimes for significant periods of time, and so toddlers can use a tablet. Technology is literally a part of the everyday life of almost every one of us, even if we don't think it. So, if we know this to be true, we also have to be aware of what we do with technology when we are around children, and not just when we are using an internet-enabled device such as a tablet.

DIGITAL THEORY

Some of you reading this, like me, will not have grown up with the sort of technology we see today. Some of you will think children shouldn't use technology, or at least not as much as they do, but technology is everywhere, it is growing and it's here to stay.

The attitudes and behaviours we have about and around technology will be absorbed by the children we care for. We have a responsibility to make sure they are learning the positive benefits of technology and how to use it in safe and healthy ways. Those of us who could be called digital visitors have had to learn how to use the technologies very quickly because of this lack of exposure when we were younger. Children are born with it in their hands, they are digital residents and therefore seem to instinctively know how to use it.

The 'continuum of digital residents and visitors' was developed by David White in 2011, building on the more widely known theory developed by Marc Prensky where we are described as digital immigrants or digital natives.

White's continuum is fluid, he says we can each move along it depending on what we are doing, whether using the web as a tool or for socialising. 'This reflects the real world as each person's experience and background will impact their access to and the availability of the digital world.'

Reflect Where are you on White's continuum? Does this change depending on what you enter the digital world for, for example, online shopping,



There are many ways that technology can be linked to learning

socialising, searching for a piece of music and so on?

REAL WORLD CONTEXT

'Quarter of UK's three- and four-year-olds own a smartphone, data shows'⁽¹⁾; this was a headline in *The Guardian* in April 2024 after Ofcom⁽²⁾ released its latest research. It led to concern about what our children have access to and what the Government is doing about keeping them safe online. The Government introduced the Online Safety Bill in 2023⁽³⁾, which goes some way to mitigating the risks, but what can we do as early years practitioners?

With technology being here, right now and developing at a faster pace than I can type, I want to support us all to feel equipped to navigate that world and ensure our children learn how to use it safely. It is easy to think we don't have a role to play in this, with the most recent version of the EYFS removing the Early Learning Goal for technology. However, if we don't make room for it in our own curriculums, where will they learn this?

Teaching children about and with technology is one way we help them learn about the world they are in as well as develop skills that will support them as they grow. So, how does it link?

Teaching children about and with technology is one way we help them learn about the world they are in



EYFS AND LEARNING LINKS

The reforms to the EYFS in 2020/21 (England and Wales) removed the Early Learning Goals relating to technology, and the only mention at all is in the 'educational programme' statements where it suggests that if children are introduced to a range of stories and rhymes, it will 'foster an understanding of our ... technologically...diverse world'.

I found this hard to comprehend, not least because I was writing a book all about tech in the early years, but also because learning about something only through stories and songs isn't going to cut it – especially

when technology is so integrated into the way we live and our children will be entering school and then the world of work where technology is present and continues to evolve. They need to learn the skills of using technology, so to remove it from the EYFS felt short-sighted and potentially failing our children.

How can we still include technology? There are so many ways and they all link to learning.

A new piece of technology equipment such as a camera, a torch or a Bee-Bot can encourage curiosity and wonder in a child, they can spend time seeing how it works, what it can do and how they can

REFERENCES

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3. <https://www.nesta.org.uk/project-updates/how-might-the-early-years-sector-use-generative-ai>
4. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/online-safety-act-explainer/online-safety-act-explainer>

incorporate it into their play, and when it doesn't work, it can prompt them to 'keep on trying' – all of which are direct links to the Characteristics of Effective Learning.

Exploring the tinker-table (or any other tech) will spark language, role play, interactions with others, physical movement, especially fine motor, and a range of feelings, from joy to frustration. There are opportunities for the adults to play alongside, role-model different ways of using the equipment, setting and reinforcing safe boundaries and sharing in the joys (and frustrations) of using the equipment.

ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE

Recently, we have seen the availability and accessibility of artificial intelligence (AI) grow and, understandably, the concern around it has grown too.

So, how is it impacting the early years?⁽⁴⁾

First, any internet-enabled device you have in the setting – tablets, desktop computers, smart speakers – will have AI features. The search engine you use will be relying on AI to give you the results it thinks best fits your request and will learn from where you click about how you use it. You can use it to create playlists, write newsletters, or identify bugs and flowers while out on a walk.

I am hopeful it can be used to reduce admin, such as generating invoices or new-starter paperwork. Families might be using it for replying to your communications; you have probably seen it in your own messaging apps when it suggests a response/reply.

The Online Safety Bill doesn't mention AI yet and despite the high profile of its use, it is unclear what will happen next. Watch this space. ■

case study: Effective use of PowerPoint



Sophie Lunn is manager of Bubbles pre-school in Bicester, Oxfordshire

Sophie and her small team have found multiple ways to use PowerPoint (PP) for learning with the children.

'We find it can help to bring a topic to life for the children,' she says. 'One example was when the children had been interested in animal lifecycles and we were able to incorporate photographs and images they had

created to recap what they had learnt.'

The Bubbles team also used PP when the children were learning about being safe and, alongside images, added a *Fireman Sam* clip to add movement and sound to the slides.

Sophie says, 'When we have some slides to share, we always set up the room first, we dim the lighting, make it cosy and set out cushions and seats in a U-shape, so everyone has a good view.



It's also important we consider the time in the day we share the slides; after the morning snack seems to work well for our children.

'The children love using the slides to look back at what they have learnt with us and often suggest using them when they are first exploring a topic. The team are aware of safety around finding images on the internet to use and talk to the children about the rules as well as model them, to keep everyone safe.'