

There's an app for that

In part four of this series, **Fiona Joines** provides a guide to using apps designed for young children and families

The final part of this series focuses on digital apps that are aimed at children and their families. As an early years

practitioner, you may well be looking for educational apps to use with the children you work with too.

There are countless apps available that are listed as 'for children' (or 'kids') or 'educational'. They lure us in with phrases like 'develops skills', 'learning' and 'thoughtfully designed for children' and they often have fun and familiar characters.

Two questions I have often been asked are: 'How do we really know if an app is suitable for the children in our care', and 'Is it really educational'?

Before we explore that, here are a few of questions for you.

REFLECTION PROMPTS

When looking for a new app for your own use, do you:

- assess the suitability for you and what you need?
- look at the rating?
- read reviews from other users?
- read independent reviews?

Think why you do/don't do these things.

If you do do these things, how do they influence the likelihood that you will download and use the app?

So, when you are looking for apps to use with the children in your care, how do we know if they are suitable and educational?

You might start by searching for apps using phrases such as 'child friendly' or 'educational', but you will find pages and pages of results, so you might search based on topics such as simple maths, or

story telling; however, you will still get an overwhelming number of results.

The app stores use ratings, which certainly tell us the age appropriateness, but this is decided by the app developers, and even the lowest rating of PEGI3 may have comic violence, which might cause concern for some adults with very young children. One app store uses the term 'expert approved' to indicate apps that are suitable for children, but the definition of expert approved is that the app is age-appropriate, fun and thoughtfully designed.

As early years practitioners we want any resource or tool we share with children to be fun, of course, but we also want learning to be a part of that play. We use the Characteristics of Effective Learning (CoEL) to help us make decisions about those resources. Will this resource be engaging and

Adults should try apps for themselves first before sharing them with children and check the software and their device's settings

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invite the child to play, will it encourage active learning, and will it ask questions of the child to help them make links in their learning, for example? We should apply this same thinking to the apps we provide for the children too.

The Characteristics of Effective Learning link to the work of Hirsh-Pasek *et al.*, where the Four Pillars of Learning were used to identify good educational apps for children. The ratings I have already mentioned don't take account of these aspects of an app, so we must do that ourselves.

Suggestion: A good way of doing this is to try the app yourself. While you play, hold the CoEL in mind and consider if they are present. You could do this as a pair or team exercise and discuss where you saw the CoEL during a team meeting.

FOUR PILLARS

The Four Pillars are: actively involved ('minds-on'), engaged with the learning materials and undistracted by peripheral elements, have meaningful experiences that relate to their lives, and socially interact with others. (Hirsh-Pasek *et al.* 2015).

In the Department of Education at University of Oxford there is a





team of brilliant researchers building on this work. The LiFT (Learning for Families through Technology) project is helping us all to navigate digital learning through apps with children.

One of the researchers, Sophie Booton, talked to me about the work she is doing around apps for child creativity and shared lots of useful information. She said, 'It is a good idea to look for apps that do specific things and have a focused area rather than those trying to do everything. Look for key words on the topic you are searching for and then read the blurb, question if it "sounds right" and what technical language is used – use your professional knowledge here.'

She also cautioned against only relying on the app store reviews and ratings.

Another suggestion from the LiFT team was to look for independent reviews of apps; Common Sense Media is one example (see Further reading). You can search for apps by age and/or topic, and you will also find articles about themes such as parental controls and online safety, as well as lots of resources specifically for professionals.

Another example is the Good Play Guide. As well as reviewing apps, it

provides reviews for a range of digital toys and shares a wealth of other resources to support you in your role.

One that I would encourage everyone to look at and share with families is the Balanced Play Diet. It is a brilliant, non-judgemental way of helping us all think about the amount of time children are on screens of any kind, and the website suggests lots of play experiences both on and off screens.

We can't talk about apps without thinking about screen time. How long is enough or too much? In addition to the play diet I mentioned above, the World Health Organization has useful guidelines for us. This guidance is specifically for children under five years old and it recommends zero hours of sedentary screen time for under-tuos. Sedentary screen time is defined here as 'time spent passively watching screen-based entertainment (TV, computer, mobile devices). Does not include active screen-based games where physical activity or movement is required.' It also suggests no screen time at all for under-ones.

As professionals we can see why we might want to stick to those guidelines; for parents, it might not be so easy. So, how can we ensure the

screen time that even our youngest children have is active? One way is to go back to the Characteristics of Effective Learning and find digital tools and apps that encourage those.

LiFT is also working on a project that can help us here: the joint media engagement project. The team on this project is focusing on how adults and children use apps together, looking at the behaviours used by the adults and the child, the features within apps that encourage and support playing together and the impact on a child's learning.

The project is building on what we know about other learning, such as when a child learns to read, we know there are huge benefits when they share stories with a loving adult.

Playing online alongside children is also a way of keeping them safe; we can check the app/game before they use it, we can check settings are appropriate, we can block ads as necessary and, crucially, we can model how to play and keep ourselves safe.

According to the LiFT team, a good app for joint play is one that provides the adult with prompts of things to say, or to encourage the child to do. It will likely provide repetition of tasks to build on the learning too.

APPS TO EXPLORE

You might start with some apps that are aimed at children, such as Number Blocks, Hey Duggie or Edurino, or you might look to apps such as Merlin for bird identification and PictureThis to identify plants.

The world of apps is vast and it can be overwhelming; some of us might simply not engage with that aspect of learning at all, but they can enhance the learning for children. So, if you do use or want to start using apps, here are a few things to remember:

GOOD PRACTICE

- When looking for apps or other online tools for children, ask yourself, which Characteristics of Effective Learning are being encouraged here?
- Make sure you have checked the settings on the device as well as the app/software you are using before children can access it.
- Play the game first.
- Do your research – there are some useful links in the Further reading panel (left). ■

FURTHER READING

- Common Sense Media: www.common-sense.org/education
- Good Play Guide: www.goodplayguide.com
- WHO guidelines on physical activity, sedentary behaviour and sleep: <https://iris.who.int/bitstream/handle/10665/311664/9789241550536-eng.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y>
- More about the LiFT project here: <https://liftprojecthub.education.ox.ac.uk>