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## Opinion: the best apps you can imagine

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## Opinion: the best apps you can imagine

### Abstract

Since digital technologies entered the realm of education, there has been strong debate as to whether they are appropriate, useful, or even harmful for young children. The concept of 'screen time' has been debated with concern (well supported by research) that sitting in front of a computer screen can be detrimental to children's posture, muscular development and body weight, as well as to their eyesight and attention span. Recommendations have suggested the exposure of preschoolers to computers should be limited to 20 minutes, and for those under 2, nil. Digital technologies are becoming increasingly mobile, making previous concerns about posture, obesity and screen 'radiation' redundant. Yet, there is no clear guidance about young children's appropriate usage of mobile technologies. This is worrisome given that tablet technologies are rapidly entering many households. There is evidence that children as young as 6 months old are becoming regular tablet users. Our current research focuses on young children's use of digital tablets. So far, it indicates that it is not the use of digital tablets themselves that is an issue. Rather, the concern is the quality of the apps children are exposed to, and the social contexts within which the apps are used.

### Keywords

imagine, can, best, you, opinion, apps

### Disciplines

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## Opinion: the best apps you can imagine

By: Irina Verenkina, Lisa Kervin and Clara Rivera in News, Opinion, Top Stories May 13, 2016 1 Comment

Since digital technologies entered the realm of education, there has been strong debate as to whether they are appropriate, useful, or even harmful for young children. The concept of 'screen time' has been debated with concern (well supported by research) that sitting in front of a computer screen can be detrimental to children's posture, muscular development and body weight, as well as to their eyesight and attention span. Recommendations have suggested the exposure of preschoolers to computers should be limited to 20 minutes, and for those under 2, nil.

Digital technologies are becoming increasingly mobile, making previous concerns about posture, obesity and screen 'radiation' redundant. Yet, there is no clear guidance about young children's appropriate usage of mobile technologies. This is worrisome given that tablet technologies are rapidly entering many households. There is evidence that children as young as 6 months old are becoming regular tablet users.

Our current research focuses on young children's use of digital tablets. So far, it indicates that it is not the use of digital tablets themselves that is an issue. Rather, the concern is the quality of the apps children are exposed to, and the social contexts within which the apps are used.

Our work further demonstrates that parents are often unsure about how to choose quality apps for their young children, and how to facilitate the use of these apps in their homes. Given the vast and rapidly growing app market, and the commercial push within this, parents are under considerable pressure to purchase so-called educational apps. Yet this educational claim is often unsubstantiated.

To address this, we have developed a number of criteria for the selection of apps, grounded in current research literature, leading theories of child development, and our own findings. These suggest that it is

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not necessarily educational activities, but rather opportunities for imaginative play, that are essential for young children's healthy growth, development and learning. It is well documented that imaginative play (or interactions in 'as if' situations), advances children's language, their ways of thinking and their social skills.

Simply put, it is essential that young children's digital play enhances their imagination and free exploration of their environment, but not in ways that are dictated and restricted by an app, nor in ways where the young child interacts in isolation with just the device.

Our criteria state that young children's digital play should include spontaneous, self-initiated and self-motivated activities that engage children's imagination. In such play, children are motivated to make their own decisions as they progress through the digital experience. The path of play is discovery-oriented and encourages children to engage collaboratively, rather than as single player. There are also some essential screen design features, such as attractive graphics and opportunities for children to freely manipulate and control the app to ensure that they 'produce rather than consume'.

In addition, our research has demonstrated that engaging in digital play together with peers, older siblings or parents is important. Whether it's sharing a device or playing alongside each other, playing together stimulates children to talk out loud as they collaborate and solve problems in imaginative ways.

The findings of our research may help families and educators make more informed app choices for young children in their care.

**Irina Verenikina and Lisa Kervin are associate professors, and Clara Rivera is a PhD student in the Early Start Research Institute at the University of Wollongong.**

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## ONE COMMENT

*Irina*

June 16, 2016 at 8:56 am

It would be really interesting to hear about parents' and or early childhood educators' experiences of choosing apps for young children in their care!  
Anybody to share?

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