

Do Apps Really Boost Brain Power? 9 Tips for Getting the Most Out of Educational Apps for Kids

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“My son created the most incredible digital drawing yesterday on my phone. He combined a family photos with these amazing colors – it looks like a real painting! I can barely find the app store and he blows me away with what he can create.”

The old scene of children sitting slack-jawed in front of glowing screens has been pushed aside by technologies that allow kids to interact, explore, and create.

As a result, parents find themselves at the epicenter of a growing industry. In the new Kids section of the App Store on iTunes, you can now browse thousands of apps based on your child’s age and interests. So how do parents sift through the options? According to PBS Kids, 77% of parents say educational content is the most important factor when considering apps.¹ This is reflected in sales. Over 80% of the top selling paid educational apps in iTunes target children.²

But what exactly does “educational” mean? Are the apps you download onto your cell phones really boosting your child’s brainpower?

Experts in the field have long told parents that passive media are a poor substitute for active play and engagement with other children and adults, even warning that many baby DVD and TV shows actually undermine what children need to succeed in the classroom.³ It is well established that children under 30 months of age do not learn effectively from screens.⁴ For older kids, learning outcomes hinge on the quality of the program and whether it is developmentally appropriate.⁵

But what about interactive touchscreen technology? The reality is that educational apps are so new that we don’t have a ton of good research on them yet. From what we can tell so far, it is *not* likely that educational apps are going to guarantee great grades. However, it *is* likely that thoughtful use of learning technologies combined with interaction, exploration and play will support and extend learning in new and exciting ways.⁶

¹ <http://www.pbs.org/about/news/archive/2013/holiday-tech-survey/>

² Shuler, C. (2012). iLearnII: A content analysis of the iTunes App Store’s education section. New York: The Joan Ganz Cooney Center at Sesame Workshop

³ <http://pediatrics.aappublications.org/content/132/5/958.abstract?rss=1>

⁴ <http://www.cmch.tv/SearchDetail2.aspx?rtrn=advnce&cid=2616>

⁵ http://www.naeyc.org/files/naeyc/PS_technology_WEB.pdf

⁶ *ibid.*



But not all digital experiences are created equal. Keep these things in mind when buying educational apps for your kids:

- **Hold off.** Babies learn best through interactions and exploration. They may be entertained, but don't assume that apps will boost learning for children under two years old.
- **Ignore the marketing material.** The label "Educational" doesn't mean much. Check out unbiased reviews to get the straight scoop. Common Sense Media is a good resource.
- **Pay attention to your child.** Choose according to your child's age and interest and monitor his reactions to see if he's engaged or bored.
- **Less can be more.** Children learn best through exploring, problem solving, and finding creative solutions. Choose apps that allow your child to explore and play instead of the type that practice a single skill over and over again.
- **Get active.** Look for apps that get your kids off the couch and into the world like nature documentation and physical activity.
- **Look beyond bells and whistles.** Apps that reward your child at every move may be engaging in the short term but don't help cultivate persistence and motivation. Choose apps that are engaging because of the content, not just the reward.
- **Get involved.** No app can replace your involvement and interest in your child's learning. Use apps together and relate it to the world around you.
- **Let your kids lead.** Resist the urge to constantly correct your child and "show her" how to use it. Ask questions and encourage your child to experiment.
- **Watch the clock.** Make sure apps aren't crowding out other learning opportunities.

