Family Time with Apps

A Guide to Using Apps with Your Kids

the Joan Ganz Cooney Center
advancing children’s learning in a digital age
Using apps together can help turn screen time into family time.

Most parenting mysteries can be solved with a combination of practical information and good, old-fashioned instincts. Does this cold require a visit to the doctor? How late should bedtime be? How should I encourage my child’s interests and passions? These are age-old problems, but parenting in an age where apps and other media are always on and always available raises new questions:

How do I know what’s best for my child with regard to technology? What role can I—and should I—play in choosing good content? How can I make sure media doesn’t get in the way of good human relationships?

Armed with practical tips from the latest research, parents can get closer to answering these modern-day questions. The truth is, whether you introduce your child to apps at all, what goals you set for using them and how your child interacts with technology day in and day out, are mostly in your (very capable) hands.

INTRODUCING APPS

Apps and other kinds of media have become an important part of our everyday lives. However, parents and experts both worry about exposing children to too much technology or exposing them too soon. The American Academy of Pediatricians suggests that screen time has “no positive benefits” for children under the age of two, and recommends no more than one or two hours of screen time a day for older children. It’s a big decision, and if you’re going to introduce your child to apps, you might want to consider a few things:

Think about your goals. What do you hope your family will get out of using apps? What habits do you want to encourage? What limits do you want to set?

Talk with your child. What are their interests? What types of decisions can you make together?
INTRODUCTION

Consider the situation. Where and when should apps be used? How can family members use apps to help connect with people and have new experiences?

The bottom line: Bringing your child into the discussion will help them be a part of the process from the beginning and help any rules and goals you set be followed more successfully.

USING APPS TOGETHER

No matter how many amazing things an app does, some of the most important activities don’t happen on your device’s screen. Think of apps as tools that can help families play and learn together. They can:

Support learning and growth. By placing your child in the driver’s seat, apps can be fun ways to learn and can foster curiosity. They can also help children to develop self-control, express their feelings, and make good choices.

Encourage communication. With your guidance, apps can be a starting point for other activities and conversations. Talking about what your children are playing, reading or hearing helps build important language skills that can benefit them in both school and social situations.

Connect people and experiences. Apps are mobile learning tools that can be used to help address everyday challenges anytime, anywhere. They can also help to connect distant family members, make stressful situations more fun, and make learning something that happens at home, not just at school.

USING THIS GUIDE

We used both recent research and real-life experiences with our own families to create this guide. Read it with your children, explore the tips and resources, and enjoy the comic strips. Overall, you’ll find:

• Ways that apps can support children’s healthy development and family learning
• Real-life examples which, based on research, may be beneficial to families
• Tips and step-by-step advice on how to use apps together with your family
• Information on how to find and choose the apps that best fit your family’s needs
• Links to other information and resources

We hope this guide is helpful, and backs up the instincts and goals you already have about how your family uses media. Just remember: no matter how you decide to introduce apps, as a parent, your role is the most important factor in how your child will benefit. When in doubt, just jump in and play together!
How to use this book

Look for the magnifying glass icon in each comic strip to find a fun surprise.

Preparing for new experiences

New experiences like the first day of school, first plane trip or first haircut can be scary for a child. Playing a game related to the activity or creating a photo album can help children imagine, talk about, and prepare for what will happen. Even daily parenting struggles like bath time and bedtime can be a little less stressful with the help of an app that shows good routines and happy results.
Explore ways to use apps together

- Playing Games Together
- Connecting with Distant Family
- Exploring the Outside World
- Making Travel More Fun
- Creating a Predictable Routine
- Preparing for New Experiences
- Creating Media Projects
- Reading Together Every Day

USING APPS TOGETHER
Playing games together is a great chance for your child to be an expert and lead family time. Games also have clear goals, rules, and challenges that help children practice making decisions and planning ahead. Play together for maximum impact: gently guide your child to follow directions, take turns and stay focused.

Look for games that build on your child’s interests.
Reading together every day is a fun way to bond that also supports development and creates a love of reading. Preschoolers who read with their parents start school with larger vocabularies and stronger language skills, which helps them in all school subjects. Apps can make it easier to squeeze in those 15 minutes—with your child's favorite stories—anywhere, any time.

Cozy up! Read e-books just like you would traditional books.

Learn More →
USING APPS TOGETHER

Creating media projects

Letting children create their own media (stories, art, games or videos) is a fun way for them to express what they’re thinking and feeling. It can also help them learn about what makes a good video, game or story. For example, some apps let children take charge of recording family memories and then make sharing them with distant family and friends easy.
Preparing for new experiences

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Keep albums of an elder child's transitions to show to your younger child(ren).
Video calls are a great opportunity for children to show off their photos, art or other work.

Connecting with distant family

Connecting to family and friends far away exposes children to new words, new ideas and important relationships. It’s hard for young children to pay attention during phone calls or videoconferences, but they may stay interested longer when they are part of a connected activity. Some apps make it easy to read a book with a far-away loved one, inspiring storytelling and show-and-tell.
When children play outside, they use all of their senses (vision, hearing, smell, touch, taste) to investigate and connect with the world around them. Apps can open the door, inspiring you and your child to discover your neighborhood and even the world. Look for ones that get children moving as they learn about birds, plants, stars, or any other natural wonder that interests them.
Making travel more fun

Travel can be stressful for everyone, but it can also make for some serious family time. Some apps can make travel more fun by encouraging everyone on the trip to play and learn together. Children can also use apps to track their route, research places to stop along the way, and document the trip with photos and stories.

Fun road trip apps get children to look outside the car window, not just down at a screen.
Predictable routines for things like eating and sleeping are important for every child’s development. The same goes for using apps. Let your child know what to expect by being consistent about where, when, and for how long she’s allowed to play. Routines may make it easier for your child to step away from the screen and help develop self-control that will benefit her both at school and at home.
When looking for apps, get your children involved.

Think about what types of things you and your children enjoy doing together, and then ask them what they would like to play. Bring them into the conversation now, and it will be more natural for them to continue talking about app choices as they get older.

Also, “screen time” (how much time children spend with apps or other media) should not be the only consideration. It’s equally if not more important to consider which apps are used and what their content is.

THERE ARE SO MANY TO CHOOSE FROM. WHERE DO YOU START?

Begin with these tips for searching the App Store:

**Kids Category:** These apps have been reviewed to ensure a great experience for younger users and must comply with additional guidelines set by Apple. They also often require parental involvement before allowing the user to link out of the app or
FINDING APPS

make a purchase. Here you can use age filters to search for apps right for your child’s age range (5 and under, 6-8, or 9-11).

**Education Category:** This is the place to look if you’re searching for an app designed to explore a specific content area or skill. There is some overlap with the Kids section, but this category also includes general education apps for all ages.

**Expert Resources** found elsewhere online can also offer great information, reviews, or even video demos of apps—especially if you’re interested in a specific one. See the Resources section at the end of this guide for more information.

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**WHAT KIND OF EXPERIENCE ARE YOU LOOKING FOR?**

As you and your child search for apps, take a look at these genres:

**Education** apps focus on specific topics. Some even serve as a reference to help identify things you might see in nature, like animals or constellations.

**Games** revolve around challenges and often reward play with points or by unlocking new levels. Games can have themes or even educational goals, like teaching fractions.

**E-book** apps may contain either a single book or a collection of multiple titles (a virtual “library”). They can vary widely, from simple to interactive:

- “Basic” e-books are a lot like regular print books, with text and/or illustrations. Some also allow you to hear the book read aloud.
- “Enhanced” e-books may offer narration as well as animations or games. You’ll find these both within the iBooks Store.

**Creative** apps give children tools to create digital works like stories, video games, movies or comics. Some can also be educational, teaching children the basics of arts and crafts, cooking, music and other hobbies.
When deciding whether to download an app, consider the following:

**DOES IT ALLOW YOUR CHILD TO LEARN AND GROW?**
- Builds on interests
- Engages in creative play
- Provides age-appropriate content

**DOES IT ENCOURAGE COMMUNICATION?**
- Provides opportunities to talk about the activity
- Offers ways to play or create together
- Connects to distant friends/family members

**DOES IT CONNECT DIFFERENT EXPERIENCES?**
- Bridges activities between spaces (like home and school)
- Prepares for new experiences
- Helps to make stressful situations more fun
MANAGING APPS

Now that you've downloaded some apps, how do you stay organized and safe?

Here are a few tips to keep your child’s apps accessible and current—and your device uncluttered.

Create Folders. Organize your apps into folders by categories or by user. For example create a folder for “games” or give each family member their own folder for their favorite apps.

Delete the old and unwanted. If you and your child decide that an app is no longer of interest, just remove it from your device. If you change your mind, you can always restore purchases by going to the App Store and downloading it again.

Starting with iOS 8, your device also offers different settings designed to make sharing apps easier for the whole family—some of which can also support playing and learning together.

Sharing Apps: When you turn on Family Sharing, the apps that one family member downloads can be shared with everyone in the group across multiple devices. This way, favorite apps and books are always available and everyone has a chance to play.

Making Purchases: When you turn on the “Ask to Buy” setting, if your child has an Under 13 account, you’ll receive a message whenever they want to make a purchase. It’s a nice warning, but also a good opportunity to talk about what interests them about the app, and whether the purchase is a good choice.

Learn more about Family Sharing directly from the Apple website.
How much media time is too much for my child?
It’s a pretty common question, and there’s more than one answer. The bottom line is, you know your child best, and can create the best routine for your family. You may want to consider what you hope your child will gain by using apps (Entertainment? A valuable lesson? A set of skills?), and whether there are certain times and places for using apps (At the grocery store? In the car? At the dinner table?). For children under the age of two, most experts agree that there should be strict limits, but for children older than two, remember that you are their most important role model.

Is reading with a book or an e-book better for my child?
Any kind of reading has real benefits, but communicating with your child while reading is really the key. Print books often allow for a more intimate and closer reading experience for young children, but many e-books have fun bells and whistles like animation, text highlighting or narration, and offer different, valuable types of learning opportunities. Most families get used to blending both print and e-book reading as a successful part of their learning routines.

How do I know whether or not my child is benefiting from the content?
Play together. It makes it easier to watch, listen and talk to your child about the app. Further, trust your instincts, paying close attention to your child’s verbal and physical cues. If she talks back to/about the action in the app while she’s playing, or if she applies something she saw or learned after app time is over, then she’s probably learning a valuable lesson or skill. Most importantly, talk with her about how the app makes her feel or how she can apply her experience to “real life.”

How can I make sure each family member plays with apps that are appropriate for them?
It’s normal for younger children to want to play the same games as their older siblings and peers (or even parents). Fortunately, there are tools that set limits on what content children can access and lists of apps organized by age range. You might also consider “family play” times when everyone gets a chance to suggest something that the whole group can play together. Finally, sometimes a child needs their parent to unplug too, so don’t let screen time become a substitute for doing other things together.
1. **Common Sense Media** provides information and advice about raising media-savvy children for parents, teachers, and policymakers. The site features ratings and reviews about apps and games, with a particular focus on educational games.

2. **Children’s Technology Review** helps teachers, librarians, publishers and parents stay up to date on the latest digital products in the children’s media market. Apps are reviewed by “picky teachers” with preschool or elementary school teaching experience.

3. The **School Library Journal** is a resource intended for librarians and educators, but you’ll find many app reviews on the site that can be very helpful for parents interested in discovering and learning more about high-quality apps and digital books.

4. The **Parents’ Choice Foundation** is a nonprofit guide to children’s media and toys. Its Parents’ Choice Award seals include mobile apps reviewed for age-appropriate content, activities and experiences, and notes on those intended to be used by children and parents together.

5. Founded by moms, **Moms With Apps** aims to help parents choose the best apps for their children. The site features developers committed to high standards for protecting children's privacy and building family-friendly options.

6. **PBS Parents** provides information on child development and early learning, as well as access to free games and activities. A special section on “Children and Media” offers tips and strategies on raising children in a digital age.

7. In 2014, **Zero to Three** issued a parenting resource called **Screen Sense: Setting the Record Straight** that offers research-based guidelines for using digital media with children under three years old.

8. The **American Academy of Pediatrics** (AAP) recommends that parents establish "screen-free" zones at home by making sure there are no televisions, computers, or video games in children’s bedrooms, and by turning off screens during meals.

9. In 2012, the **National Association for the Education of Young Children and the Fred Rogers Center** issued a joint **position paper** stating that when used intentionally and appropriately, digital media can be effective tools to support learning and development for young children.
Related links

**PLAYING GAMES TOGETHER**
Parents’ Choice
Award Winners

Common Sense Media
Games for Kids

**READING TOGETHER EVERY DAY**
Best Interactive eBooks
Young Readers

Common Sense Media
Best Book Apps

**CREATING MEDIA PROJECTS**
Edutopia
Teaching Kids to Code

Common Sense Media
Great Apps and Sites for Digital Creation

**PREPARING FOR NEW EXPERIENCES**
Common Sense Media
Journal Apps, Online Diaries, and Digital Scrapbooks

Common Sense Media
Comic Creating Apps and Websites

**CONNECTING WITH DISTANT FAMILY**
Mashable
Apps for Connected Families

Common Sense Media
Apps and Games that Promote Collaboration

**EXPLORING THE OUTSIDE WORLD**
Edutopia
7 iPad Apps for Outdoor Adventures

Common Sense Media
Apps for the Great Outdoors

**MAKING TRAVEL MORE FUN**
Common Sense Media
Road Trip Apps

Tech With Kids
Apps for Traveling Kids

**CREATING A PREDICTABLE ROUTINE**
Parents’ Choice
Media Management Tips

Common Sense Media
Screen Time
RESOURCES AND CREDITS

Credits

For a full list of research citations, please visit: www.joanganzcooneycenter.org/appguide.

The Joan Ganz Cooney Center investigates the potential of digital media to help children learn, and collaborates with educators, media producers, policymakers and investors to put this research into action. An independent nonprofit organization, the Center addresses issues of digital equity and aims to strengthen connections between formal and informal learning environments. Learn more at www.joanganzcooneycenter.org.

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