

Appy Days: A Quality App Checklist

Given that apps are constantly being added to the App Store (there are over one million different apps in the iTunes App Store alone in 2016!) it's difficult for parents to know exactly what to look for in quality apps for children.

Sure we can look in the *Apps for Kids* and *Education* categories in the iTunes App Store, but this doesn't always refine our search or help us to know what we should be looking for in a quality app.

What makes a child's app 'educational'?

Researchers are scrambling to keep up-to-date with the growing app market and assess the merits of apps. There's emerging data about the educational potential of specific apps, but we often can't transfer these findings to other apps, or even children's apps in general. In addition, much of the research in this area is quickly made redundant because by the time these studies have been conducted and published, the app has often been superseded by another app.

Instead, it's best that we draw on an established body of research from the learning and developmental sciences. We have a significant and consistent corpus of research that has identified the principles and practices that support early learning and development. We need to extrapolate these principles and practices and translate them to the digital world and specifically to the design of apps.

In a 2015 paper published in the [Psychological Science in the Public Interest](#), researchers identified four key pillars of learning, within the context of learning with apps. This paper proposes that parents and educators should look for apps that promote:

Active learning-

// Does the app encourage the child to assume an active role (physically and mentally) in their learning? Are they predominantly creating (active) or consuming (passive)?

// Does the app encourage true interaction (as opposed to surface-level interaction where the child simply taps and swipes a 'correct' answer)?



- // Does the app encourage more than a stimulus-response type of interaction (i.e. do they have to think deeply and reflect to use the app)?
- // Does the app foster creativity and thinking skills? Look for apps that require children to solve problems and create content, where possible.

Engagement-

- // Does the app effectively engage the child?
- // Does the app have limited 'bells-and-whistles' that can potentially distract a child and compromise their learning? Look for apps with simple designs, or features that parents can control (i.e. can you control the background music in the book app?)

Meaningful-

- // Is the app personally relevant to the child? Are they familiar with the context?
- // Will the child retain the information or skills by using the app?
- // Can your child easily connect the app experience to their real-life experiences and/or to concrete resources they have access to?
- // Does the app provide any suggestions for off-screen activities or play experiences to extend the learning encountered within the app.
- // Are there important contextual details to consider? For example, if it's a currency or measurement app, are the units of measurement in line with your country (i.e. \$AUD or metric units?)

Facilitates social interactions-

- // Does the app encourage social interaction with parents, siblings or peers?
- // Has the app been designed so that more than one child can use the app simultaneously?

In addition to these 4 pillars, I also suggest parents look for apps that provide:

Appropriate scaffolding-

- // Does the app compensate for young children's developing literacy? (i.e. Are there minimal written instructions?)
- // Does the app compensate for young children's developing fine motor skills (i.e. are there precise hot spots, parts of the screen, where the child needs to tap?)



// Is the app intuitive to use, or guide the children through the process to ensure success? Children are more inclined to repeatedly use apps where they experience success.

Language rich experiences-

// Does the app encourage children to use language in meaningful ways?

// Does the app expose children to new language skills and concepts?

// Is the accent used in the app an important consideration? This is particularly the case if it's a phonics or spelling app.

Precise and ongoing feedback-

// Does the app provide explicit, direct and timely feedback (as opposed to generic, unhelpful feedback such as "Bad luck. Try again.")?

// Does the app provide guidance or feedback when errors are repeated?

// Does the app use praise and rewards sparingly? Remember, children can become dependent on such praise and reward!

Value add-

// What does the app do that real materials, hands-on experiences or more traditional games or play do not afford?

// Is the app a mere replica of traditional toys or hands-on experiences ('digital worksheet' app)?

// Does the app allow your child to learn or play in completely new or different ways than traditional experiences?

// Does the app allow your child to investigate how things work?

Please Note:

// It's highly unlikely that any app would meet all of the above criteria. Use these criteria to help guide your app purchases.

// Where possible download a Lite version of the app and test-drive it *before* your child uses the app.

// Not all time an iPad needs to be 'educational'. Just like we enjoy watching trashy TV episodes, our children also enjoy using what psychologist Jocelyn Brewer calls 'digital candy'. We need to be mindful and selective that not *all* of their iPad time is spent with digital candy.

// Regardless of how sophisticated the graphics or technology is within an app, we have to remember that no app is a substitute for hands-on experiences, open-ended play and 'real' face time with parents, siblings and peers. We have to make sure that we balance young children's screen time with their green time.

They need plenty of experiences, away from screens, to learn and develop.