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GUIDELINES

for using iPads™ with young children

Technology is developing at such a pace that it is difficult to keep up to date with the changes, the latest gadgets or gismos, and have time to think about its impact today, and in the future.

We know that the number of children accessing iPads™, smartphones and tablets is growing daily; what we don't know is what impact this is having. Research in this area is in the early stages, the results of which will not be available for a few years.

What we also know is children have no hesitation in using iPads™. They approach them in much the same way as any other piece of equipment. However, it doesn't mean that you just give them an iPad™ and leave it to them. iPads™, like television, have been used to pacify children, or used as a babysitter when parents need a break. It would be foolish to say this never happens, or that it shouldn't happen occasionally. However, like everything else, you need to get the balance right. Spend time with the children while they use the iPad™ as too much unsupervised exposure to iPads™ can limit young children's social and communication skills.

CHOOSING APPLICATIONS (APPS)

Choosing suitable apps can be a challenging task given that there are over 225 000 apps specifically designed for iPads™, and new apps are being developed every day. One of the difficult aspects of choosing an app is to understand the educational content or opportunities. Is the content appropriate for the age group, easy to understand, and can be added to, or extended? Some parent group reviews base their decision on what they consider to be educational. These positive reviews tend to lean more towards the more formal apps with lots of pick and

point, rote learning and with limited creative opportunities. They often do not provide the children with an opportunity to control any of the creative processes, or what happens within the app. Some of these apps are almost the direct opposite of what is considered good early childhood practice.

Values and suitability are subjective and not always clearly stated in the reviews unless there is a high level of violence or adult content. What you need to consider are the intrinsic values—are the apps appropriate and reflective of the community, your family and early childhood professionals?

The free or 'lite' apps are usually full of advertising or promotion of other apps or games, and require you to give information or receive notification of updates and related apps. This means you either spend most of the time reading an advertisement and/or getting rid of messages, or paying extra to use the app without advertising. Also be aware that some of these advertisements are not appropriate for young children and can lead to other

internet sites or to purchasing other apps without parental consent—another good reason to supervise and be aware of what your child/ren are using.

As there are no previews before you purchase an app, it is difficult to make a decision just from the name, the look of the icon and the details of the app. I strongly recommend you read the reviews section on iTunes™, which should give you a good insight about the app. These ratings are given by people who have bought and used the app, and will give you information about the ease of use and any bugs it may have etc. There are also reliable review sites, which give even more information and recommendations.

It is also important to be aware of reviews with vested interests, and apps that promote their merchandise rather than educational value. Children are drawn to their favourite characters and designers see this as another opportunity to sell their products.

Many apps are produced in America, which means you may have apps that do not reflect Australian conditions, contexts or vocabulary. There is a very good app called *Fall*—all about the season before winter, which we call Autumn. Some apps allow you to record over the voice and slightly change the content, but they can be expensive. You also need to consider accents and country 'slang' e.g. cookies instead of biscuits, and more importantly spelling e.g. color instead of colour.

Gaming apps often require an internet connection which can result in extra costs. Be aware of children sharing game scores

or other information, through the app, which may be used inappropriately, or lead to inappropriate sites. Most of these are not suitable for preschool children. Access can be restricted through Settings (found on the home page).

OTHER CONSIDERATIONS

A screen saver and cover, preferably a full cover, provides protection for your iPad™, even adults can have accidents and damage an unprotected iPad™.

Encourage children to take regular breaks. It's easy to become so engrossed in a game that an hour can go by without noticing. iPads™ have alarms and timers, which are ideal for alerting children and adults when it is time to take a break. Twenty minutes is an ideal time to stop and have a break. You also need to check their sitting position and lighting. Are they slouching or sitting in a position that can cause discomfort or lead to poor posture after a long period of time? Is the lighting bright enough to see the screen or is there a problem with glare?

Don't use an iPad™ before going to bed. An iPad™, like other electronic devices, stimulates the brain which can result in poor sleep and can lead to other health issues.

iPads™ are fun to use, can make learning more exciting and enriching and support and enhance traditional learning. Enjoy using your iPad™ with your children. You might just find that you both learn something new.

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