

SMART LEARNING

Conversations about the best ways to use digital technologies in early childhood settings are not new. But in the last few years they have rapidly moved from *should we?* to *how should we?* How can we most effectively harness these amazing technologies to support and enhance young children's development?

The avalanche of digital technologies in the past decade—and especially the ‘smart’ technologies with operating systems that enable access to applications (apps) and the web (e.g. tablets, phones and TV etc.) mean they are now common, everyday communication, investigation and creation tools. The notion that we can shield young children from technology or ‘ban’ screen time for children is challenged on many fronts. The boundaries between technologies are increasingly blurred. A ‘smart television’ is so much more than a television. A smartphone is now a multimodal device—gaming device, street directory, GPS, magazine, camera, music maker or player, health monitor, TV or anything really.

Banning ‘screen time’ for children is like banning crayons, blocks or finger paint. Digital technologies in their many forms are present everywhere—and we use the ones with a touch screen interface many times each day from shopping to checking in on a plane or train. They are so widespread that we often forget they are the very same technologies that many people wanted to banish from classrooms not so long ago.

With smart technologies we have the whole world at our fingertips—we can be or go anywhere. Conversely our every move can be tracked. We leave a digital footprint wherever we go. That parents can now track every move their children make gives the idea of ‘helicopter parenting’ a whole new significance. This same technology

means parents can play an active part in their children's early learning and care experience even if they are at work.

Just as with the older technologies, the role of educators and families is important to ensure the best outcomes for children. Navigating the vast array of apps and opportunities and ensuring every child's experience is enriching adds new challenges to our pedagogical planning. We have to be digital curators and gatekeepers as well as pedagogues.

One of the most exciting areas of educational development in the digital arena is that of assistive technologies for children with disabilities, and especially with severe intellectual and/or physical disabilities. Digital technologies have opened new ways to work around developmental and learning challenges. Most play materials can be adapted to suit the individual requirements of a specific disability. Voice output devices, communication boards, devices operated by eye gaze, and a range of ‘switches’ and other input devices have liberated many young children, offering a degree of independence unimaginable a decade ago.

While digital technologies can enrich the learning and play environments for children, there are some worrying dimensions. My greatest concern is for the physical health of children who have too much screen time and not enough outdoor play and exercise. Equally, no matter how much screen time a child experiences, every educator and



parent must be vigilant about how and where children sit or position themselves to use their devices. Unless we're very, very careful, I predict generations of children with neck, spine and upper body/limb problems.

A second concern is around the ‘divide’ or ‘gap’ between the digital ‘haves’ and ‘have nots’. This is not a new concern, but it's one that seems to receive less attention now as the costs of many devices have come down. But, despite these price reductions, the cost of some aspects of technology remain high—and especially so for families on low incomes. Tablets, smartphones and fast internet access, not to mention maintenance and operational costs, are prohibitively expensive for many families.

In this issue of *Every Child* we bring you a range of articles showcasing ways educators are using digital technologies creatively, productively and effectively. With the *Early Years Learning Framework* and the Australian Curriculum highlighting the key role of digital technologies in creating and supporting rich learning environments, early childhood educators have on-the-ground responsibility to translate these ideas and requirements into practice.

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