

▶ getting up to speed

■■■■ on digital business: everyone's business

Change is here to stay

Overall Australians respond quickly to technology innovations. The internet, laptops and smart phones are just some of the new tools, technologies and devices that have become part of life and work in a few years.

In the early childhood sector people are embracing, dabbling or puzzling over these changes. Some are openly resisting new technologies and are concerned about risk.

While changing technology and mixed views about it are nothing new, recent innovations are so significant that some commentators are calling them 'game changers'. They are rewriting the learning environment and the business environment of early childhood in ways that need to be understood.

This Digital Business Kit looks at those changes, what they mean for educators and early childhood settings and what individuals and organisations can do. The kit won't ignore the risks of technology for children. It will deal with the risks as the sector deals with other risks in early childhood: through information, sharing, discussion and forming strategies to respond.

Why get involved

Digital technology may be always changing but it is not going away.

Children and parents are already using the technologies to find child care, choose schools, for entertainment and learning experiences.

And children are using devices at younger ages. The rate of increase in children's use of mobile phones and similar devices was highest among five- to eight-year-olds in 2012 (ABS, 2012). A quick look around supermarkets, local cafés, parks and waiting rooms, suggests younger children are also digitally mobile and using technology earlier than their older siblings did.

Young educators are posting to social media sites and forging their own professional networks after hours, on their way to work, in devices they carry with them at work.

Governments, educational bodies and other businesses are moving online. They expect to find early childhood there, so do parents. Parents want to learn about what is on offer before driving by or visiting and when they join your early childhood service or school they want to exchange information in many ways, not only by paper notes.

Get involved:

- ▶ because early childhood educators need to do with technology what they have always done—reflect, critique, explore, make wise choices and guide
- ▶ because children will do what they have always done—adopt the latest and make it their own—with or without expert guidance

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- ▶ because parents need what the early childhood sector does best—connection and encouragement, information and a framework for understanding their child's learning and behaviour
- ▶ because technology, business and society will roll on regardless, taking the future child with them.

Early childhood practitioners need their messages, wise choices and lifelong learning to be in the ears of tomorrow's adults.

[Click here to watch 'Digital business is everybody's business'.](#)



Small swipes, big leaps

The mobility of devices and the new 'touch technology'—the easy swipe, tap and slide capacity of tablets, smart phones and other devices—are two features that are currently having the biggest impact. They have enormous implications for where and how all sorts of activities take place and who controls them.

GREAT AUSTRALIAN BYTE



1 MILLION

Number of Australian households with internet access in 1998.



12.4 MILLION

Number of internet subscribers in Australia to December, 2013. (9.7 million of these were households.)



20.3 MILLION

Number of Australian subscribers who made internet connections via a mobile phone by December, 2013.

Source: ABS

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Mobility and touch technology make connectivity easy and everywhere: a screen in a house, a table in a school or early childhood centre, a wall in a museum, a hand held device on a family day care excursion, a garden activity photographed and forwarded to parents, a smart phone in the outside school hours care playground or in a child's pocket.

The boom in smart phones and tablets shows no sign of slowing. A study by the Australian Communication and Media Authority (ACMA) showed that mobility was the distinguishing feature of recent online participation.

Not just faster

Combined with a better and faster broadband connection rolling out across Australia, mobility and connectivity are changing the way Australians live and work. Already many daily tasks are routinely conducted via mobile devices including banking, bookings and inquiries, buying goods, arranging services and paying bills. When the horse and cart gave way to cars, buses and aeroplanes it was not simply substituting one means of transport that created the biggest impact; it is what new technologies make possible for the first time that matters.

As businesses, families and governments go mobile, and as children take up internet and mobile devices at younger ages, early childhood settings need to rethink—and keep rethinking—their technology use.

It means rethinking how new technology can fit with the business needs of early childhood. It requires thinking about professional development options and the educational practices of early childhood.

Any discussion about technology use in early childhood usually turns on the implications for children and for individual educators. However, directors, managers, owners and principals have increasingly complex financial, legal and regulatory obligations.

Familiar concerns with data security and privacy, staff and family policies, decision-making and governance as well as reporting requirements are being reshaped by technology. It is both an answer and a new challenge.

What to invest in, who has the skills and who will take responsibility for technology are considerations. Does it need to be expensive and comprehensive? Tablets, mobile devices and smart phones are overtaking what expensive computer labs and laptop programs of the 1990s and early 2000s tried to achieve.

Can it begin with small steps and planning, with a sense of fun and experimentation? In WA, a school program for young children trialled a single tablet per classroom before committing further. The program expanded when they bought two tablets per room. 'We don't have a paint easel for every child in the class. Why would we need a tablet per child?' the co-principal reasoned. Instead the focus was on what the devices made possible and how children would collaborate with each other and educators in using them.

Mobility and connectivity also mean that decisions made five years ago about data storage or about screens in the learning environment and managing risk need to be revisited. Restrictions on screen use may match the research but even the researchers acknowledge that developments in technology and more importantly in its use, outstrip and quickly date findings.

This is why the early childhood sector needs to do with technology what it has always done: observe, reflect and devise responses within a *National Quality Framework*, based on best available knowledge, that meet the needs of the individual child and the community of children, families and educators to which they belong.

For a profile on governance and technology

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What does the early childhood sector want?

For the Digital Business Kit, Early Childhood Australia talked with, surveyed and visited services, schools, educators and carers, teachers and academics. Key concerns recur about technology; some of them run in different directions. The Kit has been put together with these in mind. Feedback from the sector shows:

- ▶ **concern** about technology along with **eagerness** to participate and learn more
 - ▶ desire for guidance and help with specific topics, particularly how to **find the best educational tools and apps** and use them well
 - ▶ **commitment sometimes outstrips planning and skills**: tablets or smart boards are sometimes purchased without a clear idea of how to use them, without a technology plan or a strategy and may be put in a cupboard 'for later' or are under-utilised
 - ▶ early childhood services and schools are taking innovative steps and using technology to find **savings in money, time and paperwork**. The educator 'on the ground' as well as directors, principals, operators and anyone involved in administration are feeling direct benefits
 - ▶ nervousness, confusion and resistance about **whether technology belongs** in early childhood at all
 - ▶ **concern about risks** especially the risk of increasing **screen time** for children and the impact on physical, social, cognitive and mental wellbeing of children now and on the future adult
 - ▶ **excitement about the potential** for technology to improve the learning experience and engage reluctant learners
- ▶ many individuals, early childhood services and schools are making good use of technologies in the classroom and outside of it and want a place to **share and learn from others**
 - ▶ some imaginative uses of technology combined with other strategies can **engage hard to reach children** for instance resistant readers, those with learning or behaviour difficulties or children whose participation is compromised by other factors
 - ▶ technology has some success in **engaging parents** in their child's learning. Educators are experiencing this in tangible ways and building on it for learning and for relationships
 - ▶ some individuals and early childhood services are **doing a lot with a little**. Others have invested in technology but are unsure about the next steps
 - ▶ in some quarters there is a **strong fear of technology**. Fear about lacking skills, looking inadequate, not having support to use technology well in daily practice. Fear about being already behind and unable to catch up
 - ▶ **parents are pushing and pulling on technology**: some want technology uses that are ahead of an educator's or organisation's capacity, or which early learning services or educators do not want to implement. Other parents are resistant, feel under-equipped or are unable to support their child's digital learning.



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Left out of the discussion

Focusing on some concerns can overshadow other important parts of the conversation:

- ▶ The risk of missing out: some children do not have access to digital technology at home or in their community while others have access and expert guidance.
- ▶ Who will help children form lifelong good habits and practices about technology if early childhood professionals do not? What kind of information and technology will children drift towards if left to their own devices—or left on their own with devices?
- ▶ Where will parents find help with the educational and developmental aspects of technology use if the sector is not informed and engaged?
- ▶ The opportunities. A focus on risk and screen time is narrowing the debate and impoverishing discussion. It is preventing positive messages from being heard, slowing discussion about content, about how to create skills within the sector, on what childhood services can do with technology.
- ▶ The steps adults can and need to take to become better informed digital citizens.
- ▶ What parenting practices would benefit from the expertise that only early childhood professionals—immersed in the daily understanding of children's development—can offer?
- ▶ Missing out on the benefits to the business of early childhood. Choosing and managing technology can provide substantial advantages to a sector that often describes itself as time and resource poor. Easier compliance with mandatory reporting, access to wider professional development, promotion, recruitment and stronger connections with parents are a few of the areas that smart technology can help.

- ▶ Harnessing technology to increase inclusion and enhance the educational experience of children and families with disabilities or learning difficulties, educators and children in remote areas, disadvantaged schools and early childhood services, children from families where English is not the first language.

For a profile on smarter, faster reporting with tablets

[click here](#)

Facing risk

Early childhood settings manage many risks: potential physical injury or harm to children and to employees, financial and business risks, professional and personal reputations. Road rules and safety messages deal with traffic; fences, supervision, swimming lessons and water safety messages for pools. From an early age children are taught about staying safe, good and bad touching, stranger danger.

There is a role for educators in creating a balanced approach to technology, in showing confidence, fun and curiosity to children in the use of technology. Educators and early childhood leaders need to be informed and engaged in order to make wise choices about technology use by children.

The adults in children's lives need to model the behaviour they want to see. Bolting the doors or keeping children in bubble wrap are not options for other risks in early childhood. The sector can apply its well-formed, sensible approaches to managing digital technology: appraise, be informed, plan and take action.

The next module in the Digital Business Kit (module 2) will talk more about risk and how to be cyber smart and cyber safe.

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For children, adults can:

- ▶ **start early:** develop the young child's technology behaviours, shape attitudes and values as with food, road safety and playing nicely
- ▶ **do with:** use technology together, you will learn and so will they
- ▶ **comment** and be curious
- ▶ **let them** show you

- ▶ **get involved** and stay involved. Many adults watch and comment on TV with children but leave them alone to their own (digital) devices
- ▶ **talk, listen** and keep doing it: talk about values and digital good manners. Talk about 'what if'. Focus on the content rather than the device
- ▶ **model** the behaviour you want to see in the child
- ▶ **keep it fun** and playful as well as educational
- ▶ **Think** about the future child. Does this story, this image need to be shared if it will humiliate, limit or embarrass them later?

See **Chatterbox** to share and learn from parent experiences.



Where to start

What worked before, may not fit today. ACMA research shows that many of the most used technologies and ways of doing business in Australia today barely existed 10 years ago. And what seems unusually innovative today is likely to be the norm for business, learning and relationships tomorrow.

Becoming **comfortable with new technology** is a process similar to learning to read. Persistence, practice and patience are key. Start small. Be curious, experiment. Reflect on the meaning for early childhood practice. Think about the implications for early childhood business.

Be prepared to make mistakes and feel stupid. Find someone to ask. Talk within the team or seek colleagues further afield. Go online. Browse the digital magazines at a library or newsagent.

Tackle the jargon. If you are not a digital native it can feel like learning a language. New words, unfamiliar meanings and strange pronunciations can quickly make a competent person feel inadequate. Start building a digital vocabulary and add to it every week. Try Google's *Good to Know Jargon Buster* for simple explanations online or begin with *Wikipedia*.

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DIGI-WORD

A **digital native** has grown up with and is comfortable using many kinds of technology. A digital native is not waiting for technology to stop or stop changing. (Unless adults get involved with the message of lifelong learning though, today's digital native might be tomorrow's technophobe.)

Do a simple skills audit

Organisations and individuals can start asking questions and making lists of answers and options:

- ▶ How am I/how are we using technology well now?
- ▶ What could I/we know more about or do better?
- ▶ Who among us has the skills and interest to make a start?
- ▶ What help and resources can I/we find elsewhere: through the parent community, peer networks, local businesses, community and government sources, the online world?

Sources, resources and more

- ▶ Get up to speed with ECA's Digital Business Kit: next modules cover digital technology as a tool for learning and getting started.
- ▶ For help with harnessing business advantages see the Australian Government's digital business site at: www.digitalbusiness.gov.au.
- ▶ State and territory governments provide education and business information. For a good example of digital technology guidelines see the

Department of Education and Training's technology guide, New South Wales at: www.det.nsw.edu.au/policies/technology/communication/techguide.pdf.

- ▶ Learn more about cyber smart behaviour and engaging with the digital world at ACMA's cyber smart citizen page at: cybersmart.gov.au
- ▶ For parents and others interested in technology issues from tots to teens try ACMA's Chatterbox.
- ▶ **Be Deadly Online** is the cyber smart site for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

Share your favourite digital resource, tool or handy tip. Email: dbk@earlychildhood.org.au or [#digichild](https://twitter.com/digichild).

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