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Not all appy children get best of educations

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Rachel Browne
Social Affairs Reporter
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Stimulating creativity: KU Killara Park preschoolers use educational apps on the school's iPads. Photo: Ben Rushton

In the expanding world of early childhood education and technology, not all apps are created equal.

Several Australian studies into preschoolers and tablet computers are under way and have found the devices can be an effective learning tool if used appropriately.

But the problem for parents is distinguishing between apps and overcoming their own natural concerns about children and technology.

Sandra Gattenhof, of the Queensland University of Technology, is studying how creative apps can boost literacy and numeracy skills in children from three preschools in lower socio-economic areas.

She believes children get the most benefit from a tablet when teachers and parents are involved. "Tablet technologies can be used to help conversations with children," Associate Professor Gattenhof said. "We're showing parents how to use these devices in the home as an educational device rather than a babysitter."

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Jordy Kaufman, a senior research fellow at the Swinburne University of Technology who is researching the effects of tablet use in 140 three- to seven-year-olds, said there was conflicting information about technology and children.

"A lot of parents think it's this fantastic learning tool and other parents seem to think it's tantamount to child abuse," he said.

Dr Kaufman points out that many of the concerns around screen time are based on studies into passive television viewing rather than tablets, and the two are quite different.

"I don't like screen time as a concept," he said. "You can read a book on a screen or you can watch TV on it and then there is everything in between. There are games which have some educational value, games which have no educational value and games which are totally inappropriate for children."

His research has found that tablet use in young children has no negative effects on executive function, which is the cognitive ability to exercise control and manage tasks such as planning and problem solving.

He has also found they can transfer the skills they have learnt on a tablet into the real world.

While parents have raised concerns about their children becoming "addicted" to devices, Dr Kaufman believes such fears may be unfounded. "Parents have indicated that kids are showing addictive-like behaviours and show signs of withdrawal when you take the devices away," he said.

"So we're starting to look at whether that's something specific to screens or whether it's specific to any kind of toy they're very much engaged in."

Kristy Goodwin, director of Every Chance to Learn and lecturer at Macquarie University, said parents had been bombarded with educational apps in recent years. Her research has found that 72 per cent of educational apps are aimed at toddlers and preschoolers, with the majority of them rote learning apps.

"There is a temptation among some parents just to look for apps with rote learning because that's how they were taught," Dr Goodwin said. "But an iPad is not an ideal tool for rote learning."

"For that very young age group, they are much better off using apps which stimulate creative expression, language development and problem solving."

Laure Hislop, of KU Killara Park preschool, prefers apps that encourage creativity, and the preschool has two iPads for that purpose.

"The choice of apps is so important," she said. "There are some really good ones but I have seen ones which look like poker machines and there is no place for them in here."

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