Family Time with Apps

A Guide to Using Apps with Your Kids

the Joan Ganz Cooney Center
at Sesame Workshop

advancing children's learning in a digital age

Contents

Families today have so many media choices: technology is everywhere.

Most parenting mysteries can be solved with a combination of practical information and good judgement. However, parenting in an age where technology is always on and always available raises important new questions:

How do I know what's best for my child when it comes to technology? How can I help choose the best apps for my child? How can I make sure media doesn't get in the way of good relationships?

With practical tips from the latest research, we can get closer to answering these modern-day questions. The truth is, decisions about when to introduce your child to apps, the goals you set for using them and how your child uses technology each day, are best made by you as a parent.

Digital media have become an important part of our daily lives, but experts worry about exposing children to too much technology, especially when they are young. Spending time playing and interacting with the people in their lives is crucial for young children's development. The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends no more than two hours of screen time a day for children older than two, and as little as possible for zero-to-two-year-olds, who need lots of sensory experiences and real-life contact. When digital devices are in the hands of young children, they should be closely monitored by responsible adults. Here are a few things to consider:

- **Think about your goals.** What do you hope your family will get out of using apps? What habits do you want to encourage? What limits do you want to set?"

- **Talk with your children.** What are their interests? What types of decisions can you make together?

- **Consider the situation.** Where and when should apps be used? How can family members use apps to help connect with people and have new experiences?

- **Look at the content.** What is the value of the app(s) you are considering, and how does it relate to your child? One app may be a completely different experience from another.
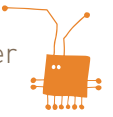
Using this guide

No matter how many amazing things an app does, some of the most important activities happen away from the screen. Think of apps as tools that can help families play and learn together.

They can:

- **Support learning and growth.** Apps can offer fun ways to learn and can foster curiosity. They can also help children to develop self-control, express their feelings, and make good choices.

- **Encourage communication.** With your guidance, apps can be a starting point for other activities and conversations. Talking about what your children are playing, reading or hearing helps build important language skills and encourages creative thinking.

- **Connect people and experiences.** Apps are mobile tools that can be used to help address everyday challenges. They can also help to connect distant family members, relieve stressful situations, and make learning something that happens at home, on a bus, or grandma's house, not just at school.

- **Connect people and experiences.** Apps are mobile tools that can be used to help address everyday challenges. They can also help to connect distant family members, relieve stressful situations, and make learning something that happens at home, on a bus, or grandma's house, not just at school.

We used both recent research and real-life experiences with our own families to create this guide. Read it with your children, explore the tips and resources, and enjoy the comic strips. You'll find:

- Real-life examples which, based on research, may be beneficial to families

- Tips on using apps together with your family

- Information on how to find and choose the apps that best fit your family's needs

- Overall, ways that apps can support children's healthy development and learning

- Links to other information and resources

We hope this guide will build on the instincts and goals you already have about how your family uses media. Just remember: no matter how your children use apps, as a parent, your role is the most important factor in how your child will benefit. When in doubt, just jump in and play together!
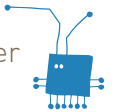
Playing games together

Playing together gives you opportunities to talk about what is going on in the game and share an activity. Games have clear goals, rules, and challenges that help children practice making decisions. Don't have time to play together? Ask your child to share what they like best about the games they play when you have time to chat.
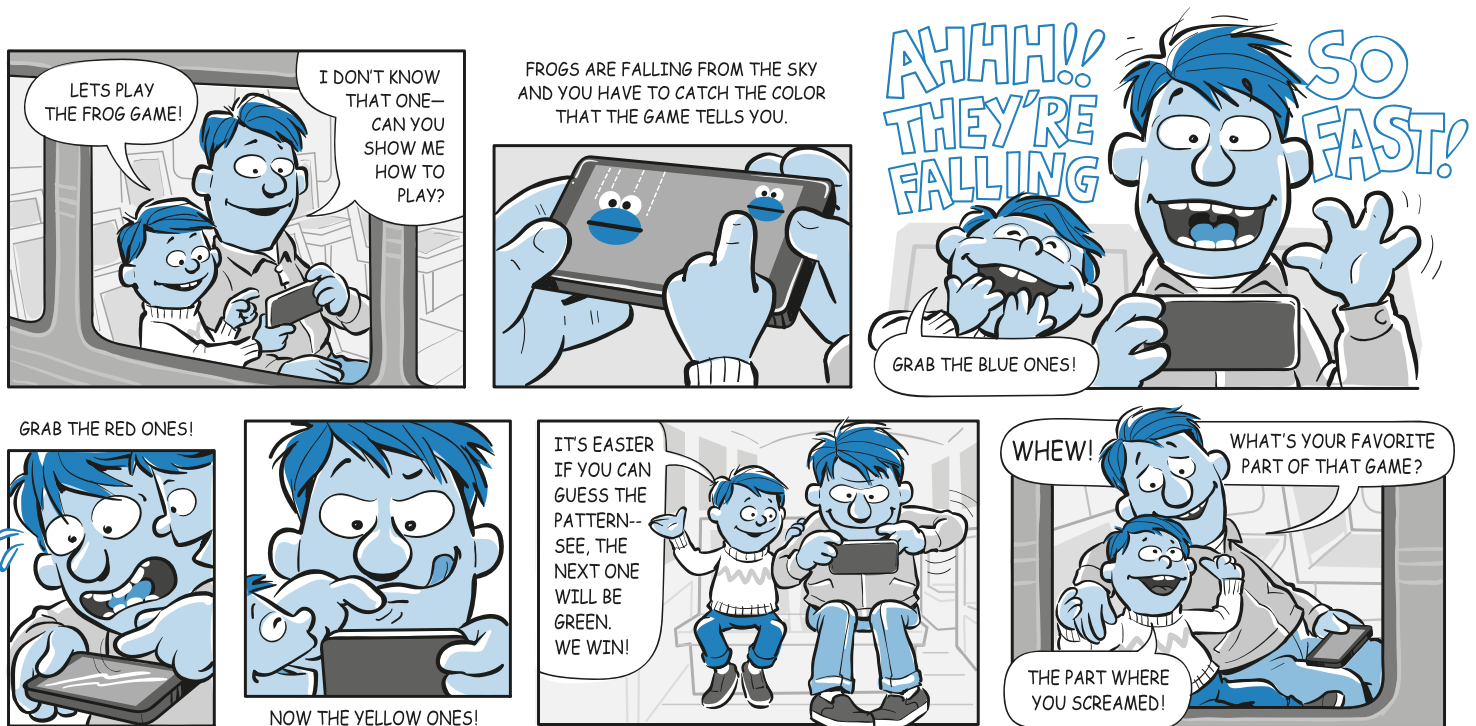
Research shows that children learn more from all kinds of media when families participate too. Whenever you're playing with apps, reading books or watching television together, children have more opportunities to ask questions and learn about what they are seeing, which can lead to even more opportunities for conversations.

Don't worry about letting your child play alone. But do take the time to play together when you can. You'll both have more fun!

Parents' Choice - parents-choice.org
search "Mobile App Award Winners"

Common Sense Media - commonsensemedia.org
search: "Best Kids Game Mobile Apps"

MORE INFORMATION

TIPS & ACTIVITIES

1. Look for games that build on your child's interests.

2. If you like traditional games with a little twist, digital versions of popular board games can be fun to play on an iPad with family members.

3. Make it physical. For example, pull up a video streaming app to find a popular dance tutorial video or to practice new tricks in a sport or activity that your child is interested in.
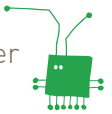
Reading together every day

Reading together for 15 minutes every day is a fun way to bond that creates a love of reading. Studies have shown that preschoolers who read with their parents start school with larger vocabularies and stronger language skills, which helps them in all school subjects. Apps can make it easier to squeeze in those 15 minutes—with your child's favorite stories—anywhere, any time.
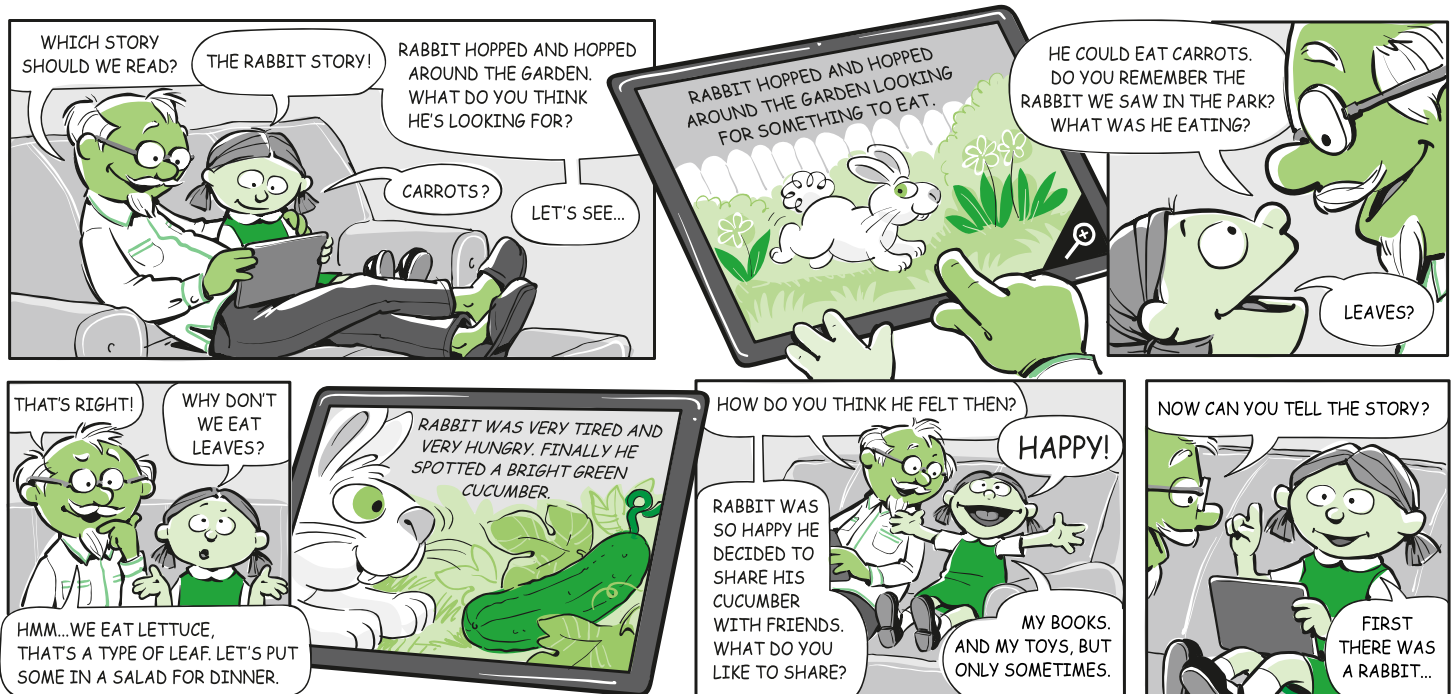
MORE INFORMATION

By reading to your child, whether with print or digital books, for at least 15 minutes a day, you introduce her to new words and ideas. E-book apps can allow you to find stories in various languages, so if your child is learning more than one language she'll have the opportunity to read in all of them. Try asking open-ended questions, encourage her to imagine what's next, or connect parts of the story to her own life to get even more out of your reading time together. Some studies have found that "simple" e-books (those with just text and illustrations) might make for better parent-child reading experiences because they encourage more conversation about the story. "Enhanced" e-books have interactive features like animations and embedded games. These may create a different kind of reading experience, but they can also sometimes distract a child who is just beginning to read.

Best Interactive eBooks - bestinteractiveebooks.com
search: "Young Readers Category"

Common Sense Media - commonsensemedia.org
search "Best Book Apps for Kids"

TIPS & ACTIVITIES

1. Cozy up! Read e-books just like you would traditional books.

2. Pause often to ask your child about what's happening in the story and how it connects to her own life.

3. Some e-books let users record their own voice narrating the story. Let your child be the reader; or if she doesn't read yet, encourage her to tell her version of the story while looking at the pictures.
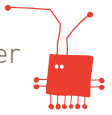
Creating media projects

Creating their own media (stories, art, games or videos) is a fun way for children to express what they're thinking and feeling. It can also help them learn about what makes a good video, game or story. Some apps make it easy for children to record family memories that can be shared with distant family and friends.
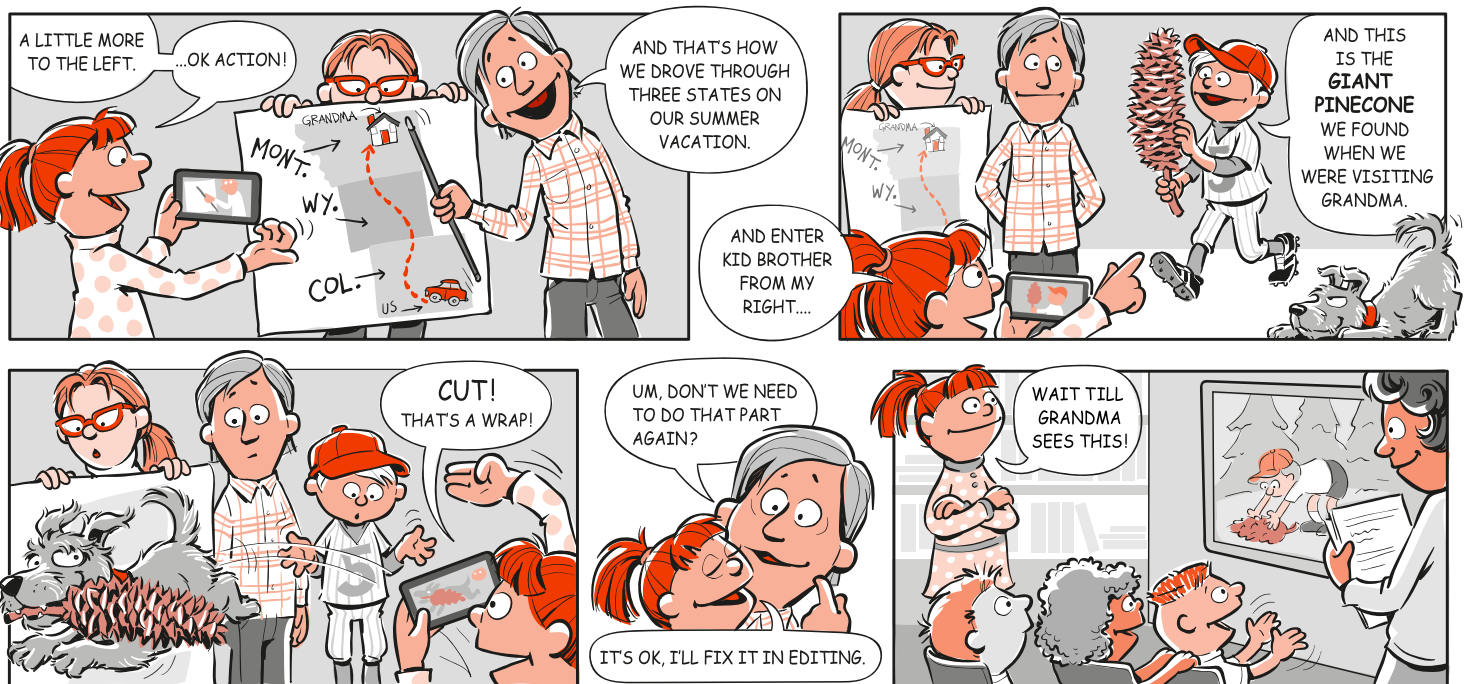
MORE INFORMATION

Young children can learn a lot from sharing their own stories and experiences. Telling stories through imaginative play helps develop language skills they will use later when they learn to read and write. Creating media is also an important part of gaining "digital media literacy," which helps children understand and evaluate the messages they see and hear.

Edutopia - edutopia.org
search: "Teaching Your Kids to Code"

Common Sense Media - commonsensemedia.org
search: "Great Apps and Sites for Digital Creation"

TIPS & ACTIVITIES

1. For older children, some apps can be an introduction to programming and computer science.

2. Help your child to create her own version of a story from her favorite book or TV show.

3. Recording self-produced "news reports," or interviews with family members can be a great way to get to know relatives and people in the community.
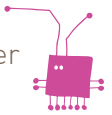
Preparing for new experiences

New experiences like the first day of school, first plane trip or first haircut can be scary for a young child. Playing a game related to the activity can help children imagine, talk about, and prepare for what will happen. Even daily parenting struggles like bath time and bedtime can be a little less stressful with the help of a game or video that demonstrates good routines and happy result.
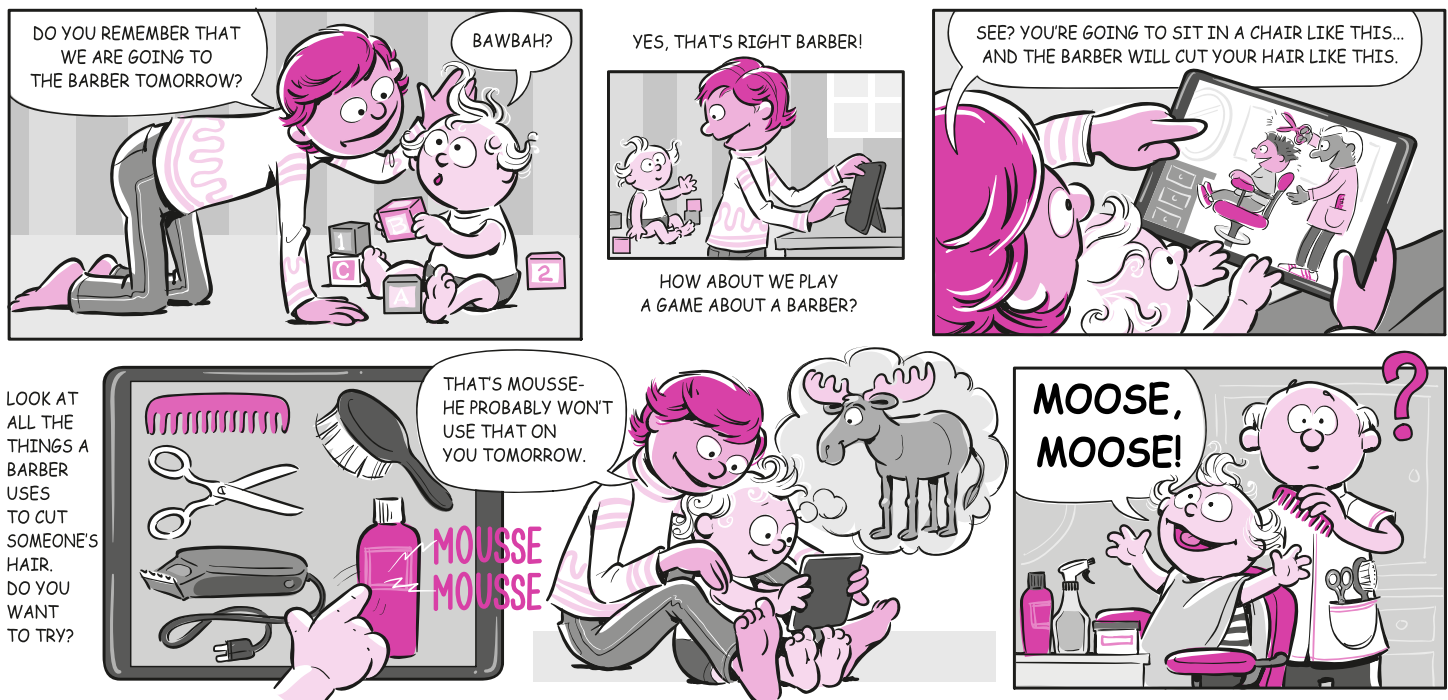
MORE INFORMATION

New activities and settings are often scary to young children because they're still developing the ability to take on challenges and process their surroundings. Some new experiences come with strong emotions too, such as the birth of a sibling, starting school, or moving to a new home, making things even harder. Books and videos have long been used to help children better handle new situations. Apps can be useful in the same way, whether you use a program that's been made for this purpose, or get creative and make your own.

Common Sense Media - commonsensemedia.org
search: "Journal Apps, Online Diaries, etc."

Common Sense Media - commonsensemedia.org
search: "Comic-Creation Apps and Websites"

TIPS & ACTIVITIES

1. Keep photos of older children's experiences to show to your younger child(ren), and encourage them to talk about how they felt during those times.

2. For a child who may be nervous about visiting the doctor or dentist, apps or videos can give them a sense of what it's like to go to an appointment or even play the role of doctor or dentist.

3. To make the most out of everyday experiences, explore apps that feature activities in places as ordinary as the grocery store or the park.
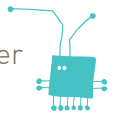
Connecting with distant family

Connecting to family and friends far away exposes children to new words, new ideas and important relationships. It's hard for young children to pay attention during phone or video calls, but they may stay more involved when they are part of a connected activity. Some apps make it easy to read a book with a far-away loved one, or to play games together.

MORE INFORMATION
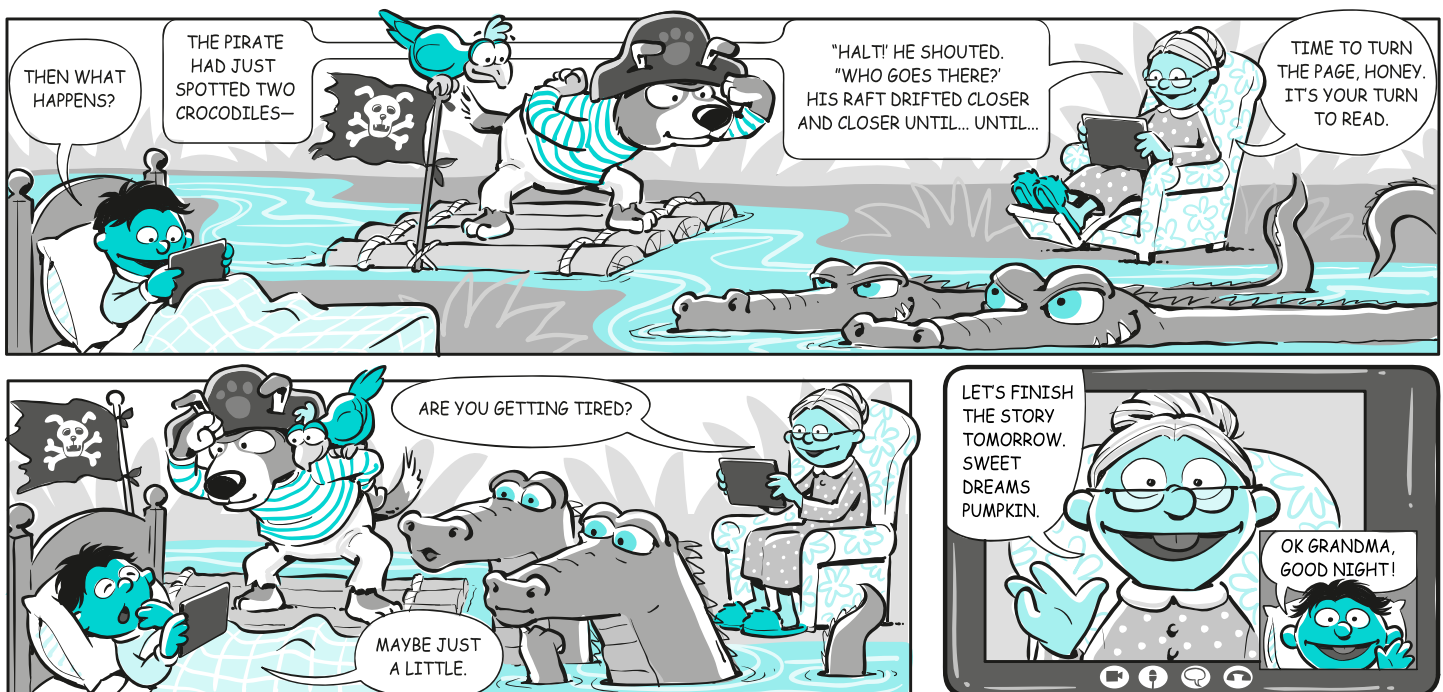
Studies show that young children who videoconference with remote loved ones stay engaged longer when they participate in activities like reading books together, singing, telling stories, and playing show-and-tell. Videoconferencing with relatives and friends abroad can also be an opportunity for children to practice a new or less-spoken language. For example, a child growing up in the U.S. learning both English and Spanish could videoconference with Spanish-speaking relatives.

Mashable - mashable.com
search: "6 Essential Apps for Connected Families"

Common Sense Media - commonsensemedia.org
search: "Apps and Games that Promote Collaboration"

TIPS & ACTIVITIES

1 Video calls are a great opportunity for children to show off their photos, art or other work.

2 If scheduling a video call is a challenge, apps also make sharing voice, photo and video messages easy.

3 Some storybook apps allow you to record a reading of a book by a loved one and share it.
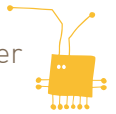
Exploring the outside world

When children play outside, they use all of their senses (vision, hearing, smell, touch, taste) to investigate and connect with everything around them. Apps can open the door, inspiring you and your child to discover your neighborhood and the wider world. Look for ones that get children moving as they learn about birds, plants, stars, or anything else that interests them.

MORE INFORMATION

Exploring the natural world boosts a child's curiosity and opens them up to new experiences. Adventures outside can even foster an interest in science, and can give children a chance to think like a scientist—to observe what's happening, document it (using photos, drawings or voice recordings), and guess why certain things happen (make hypotheses).
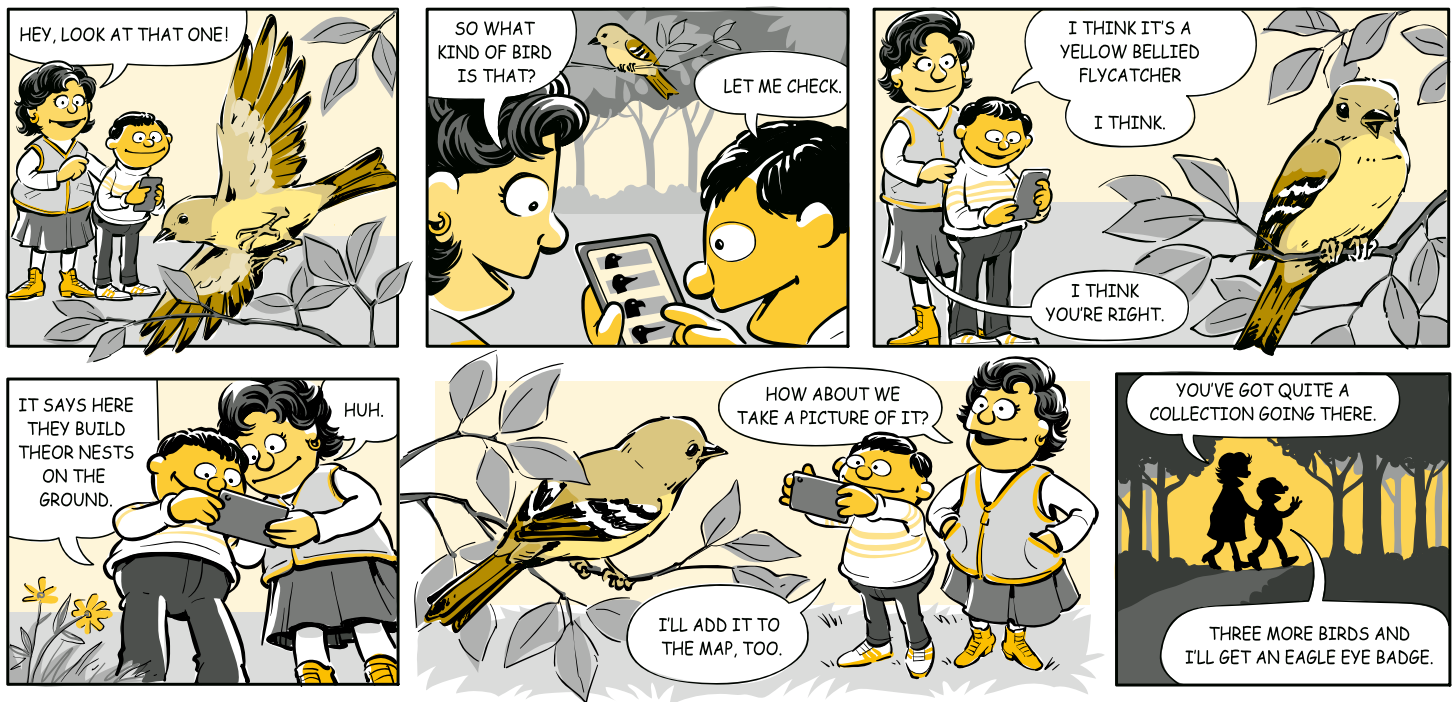
Edutopia - edutopia.org
search: "7 iPad Apps for Outdoor Adventures"

Common Sense Media - commonsensemedia.org
search: "Apps That Inspire Kids to Play

TIPS & ACTIVITIES

1. Use map apps to plot places you've visited and talk about your local area as you explore.

2. On family walks, let your children use your device's camera to take pictures of the plants and animals you see. If you have a regular route, take pictures of the same spot throughout the year and talk about how things change with the seasons.

3. Geocaching apps work like treasure hunts by giving you clues to find hidden "caches," or little boxes full of fun stuff. Once you find a cache, you get to keep what's inside as long as you leave something in its place for the next treasure hunter.
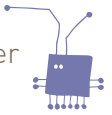
Making travel more fun

Traveling or commuting can be stressful, but it can also be fun family time. Some apps can make trips more enjoyable by encouraging everyone on the trip to play and learn together. Children can also use apps to track their route and document the trip with photos and stories.
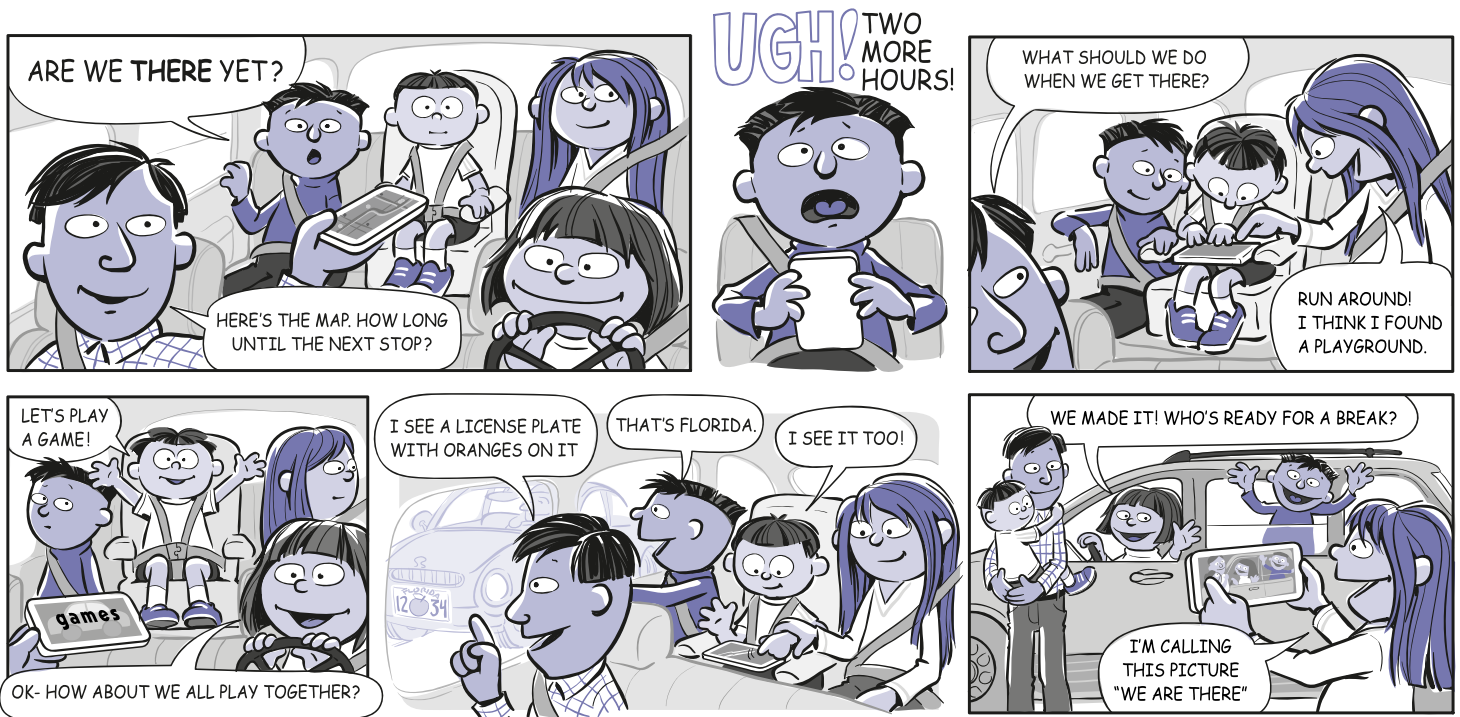
MORE INFORMATION

Letting children actively take part and play important roles in everyday family activities like cooking, cleaning or navigating on a family trip helps them learn and develop. Functional activities like planning a vacation become fun with apps; or choose activities that everyone can enjoy together, like multi-player games or videos. All of these options help children interact, exercise their thinking and questioning skills and help them connect with one another instead of keeping each child focused on his own screen.

Common Sense Media - commonsensemedia.org
search: "Best Road Trip Apps"

Tech With Kids - techwithkids.com
search: "Apps for Traveling Kids"

TIPS & ACTIVITIES

1 Use apps to teach your child about your destination and how you'll get there.

2 Allow your child to use the camera app to take pictures of the trip— scenes from inside the car, rest stop adventures, and arriving at your final destination. Later, use a scrapbook or comic strip app to make an album.

3 Let older children help navigate with map apps. Ask them to figure out how long it will take to get to your destination, or to locate the nearest rest stop or a place for the family to break for lunch. They can also find apps or videos that describe your destination.
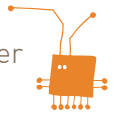
Creating a predicatable routine

Predictable routines for things like eating and sleeping are important for healthy development. The same goes for using apps. Let your child know what to expect by being consistent about where, when, and for how long she's allowed to play. Routines may make it easier for your child to step away from the screen and help develop self-control that will benefit her both at school and at home.
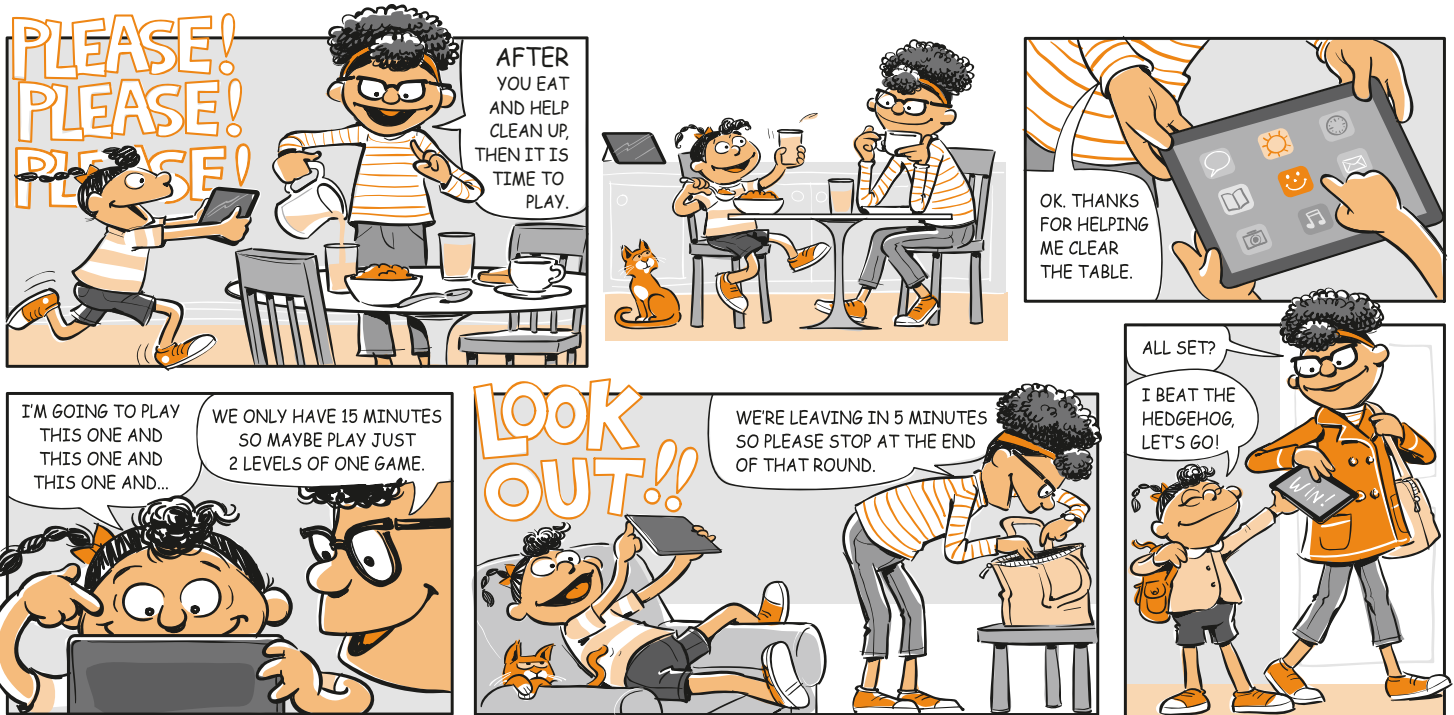
Routines and consistent limits on app time can make it easier in the short and long term for children to step away from the screen. Setting limits helps your child develop important self-regulation skills and keeps screen time from interfering with other important activities like playing outdoors, doing homework and sleeping. Context is important: choose situations or times that you feel are appropriate for using apps and limit the rest. For example, you might encourage her to use apps while waiting for an appointment, but have a rule against breaking out the tablet during meals.

Parents' Choice - parents-choice.org
search: "Media Management Tips"

Common Sense Media - commonsensemedia.org
search: "Parent Concerns: Screen Time"

MORE INFORMATION

TIPS & ACTIVITIES

1. Have a designated "parking spot" for devices to live when it's not time to play.

2. Set a regular time for a family play hour at least once every week.

3. For younger children, a little advance warning that it will be time to stop soon can make it easier to turn off the device when the time comes.
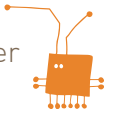
When looking for apps, get your children involved.

Think about the types of things you and your children enjoy doing together, and ask them what they would like to play. Bring them into the conversation now, and it will be more natural for them to continue talking about app choices as they get older.

Also, "screen time" (how much time children spend with apps or other media) should not be the only consideration. It's equally, if not more important, to consider which apps are used, what their content is, where the apps will be used, and the needs of your individual child.


THERE ARE SO MANY TO CHOOSE FROM. WHERE DO YOU START?

Begin with these tips for searching the App Store:

<u>Kids Category:</u> These apps have been reviewed to make sure younger users have a great experience and must follow additional guidelines set by Apple. They also often require parental involvement before allowing the child to link out of the app or make a purchase. Here you can use age filters to search for apps right for your child's age range (5 and under, 6-8, or 9-11).

<u>Education Category:</u> This is the place to look if you're searching for an app made to explore a specific content area or skill. There is some overlap with the Kids section, but this category also includes general education apps for all ages.

Expert Resources found elsewhere online can also offer great information, reviews, or even video demos of apps—especially if you're interested in a specific one. See the Resources section at the end of this guide for more information.
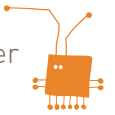
When deciding whether to download an app, consider the following:

✓ DOES IT CONNECT DIFFERENT EXPERIENCES?

- ☐ Bridges activities between spaces (like home and school)
- ☐ Prepares for new experiences
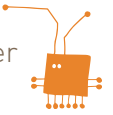- ☐ Helps the family have fun together

✓ DOES IT ALLOW YOUR CHILD TO LEARN AND GROW?

- ☐ Builds on interests
- ☐ Engages in creative play
- ☐ Provides age-appropriate content rather than passive tapping

✓ DOES IT ENCOURAGE COMMUNCATION?

- ☐ Provides opportunities to talk about the activity
- ☐ Offers ways to play or create together
- ☐ Connects to distant friends/family

Related links

WHAT KIND OF EXPERIENCE ARE YOU LOOKING FOR?

As you and your child search for apps, take a look at these genres:

Education apps focus on specific topics. Some even serve as a reference to help identify things you might see in nature, like animals or constellations.

Games revolve around challenges and often reward play with points or by unlocking new levels. Games can have themes or even educational goals, like teaching fractions.

E-book apps may contain either a single book or a collection of multiple titles (a virtual "library"). They can vary widely, from simple to interactive:

- "Basic" e-books are a lot like regular print books, with text and/or illustrations. Some also allow you to hear the book read aloud.
- "Enhanced" e-books may offer narration as well as animations or games. You'll find these both within the iBooks Store.

Creative apps give children tools to create digital works like stories, video games, movies or comics. Some can also be educational, teaching children the basics of arts and crafts, cooking, music and other hobbies.

PLAYING GAMES TOGETHER
Parents' Choice - parents-choice.org
search "Mobile App Award Winners"

Common Sense Media - commonsensemedia.org
search: "Best Kids Game Mobile Apps"

READING TOGETHER EVERY DAY
Best Interactive eBooks - bestinteractiveebooks.com
search: "Young Readers Category"

Common Sense Media - commonsensemedia.org
search "Best Book Apps for Kids"

CREATING MEDIA PROJECTS
Edutopia - edutopia.org
search: "Teaching Your Kids to Code"

Common Sense Media - commonsensemedia.org
search: "Great Apps and Sites for Digital Creation"

PREPARING FOR NEW EXPERIENCES
Common Sense Media - commonsensemedia.org
search: "Journal Apps, Online Diaries, etc."

Common Sense Media - commonsensemedia.org
search: "Comic-Creation Apps and Websites"

CONNECTING WITH DISTANT FAMILY
Mashable - mashable.com
search: "6 Essential Apps for Connected Families"

Common Sense Media - commonsensemedia.org
search: "Apps and Games that Promote Collaboration"

EXPLORING THE OUTSIDE WORLD
Edutopia - edutopia.org
search: "7 iPad Apps for Outdoor Adventures"

Common Sense Media - commonsensemedia.org
search: "Apps That Inspire Kids to Play Outside"

MAKING TRAVEL MORE FUN
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search: "Best Road Trip Apps"

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CREATING A PREDICTABLE ROUTINE
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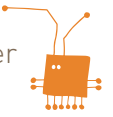
Now that you've downloaded some apps, how do you stay organized and safe?

Here are a few tips to keep your child's apps easy to find and current—and your device uncluttered.

Create folders. Organize your apps into folders by categories or by user. For example create a folder for "games" or give each family member their own folder for their favorite apps.

Delete the old and unwanted. If you and your child no longer want an app, just remove it from your device. If you change your mind, you can always restore purchases by going to the App Store and downloading it again.

Starting with iOS 8, your device also offers different settings designed to make sharing apps easier for the whole family—some of which can also support playing and learning together.

Sharing apps. When you turn on Family Sharing, the apps that one family member downloads can be shared with everyone in the group across multiple devices. This way, favorite apps and books are always available and everyone has a chance to play.

Buying apps. When you turn on the "Ask to Buy" setting, you'll receive a message whenever your child wants to make a purchase. It's a nice warning, but also a good opportunity to talk about what interests them about the app, and whether the purchase is a good choice.

Learn more about Family Sharing directly from the Apple website.
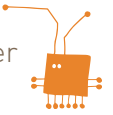
Frequently asked questions

How much media time is too much for my child?

Parents and experts worry about the right balance. Studies have shown that too much screen time might lead to behavior problems or even difficulty sleeping. You may want to consider what you hope your child will gain, and whether there are certain times and places for using apps. Most experts agree that there should be little if any screen time for children under two so that media will not replace the hands-on activities and human interaction babies need for their development. For older children, remember that you are their most important role model.

Again, it's not just about the amount of time – it's equally if not more important to consider the three Cs: the needs of your child, the context, and the quality of the content."

Is reading with a book or an e-book better for my child?

"Any kind of reading has real benefits, but communicating with your child while reading is really the key. Print books allow for an intimate and close reading experience for young children, but many e-books have features like animation, text highlighting or narration, and offer different, valuable types of learning opportunities."

How do I know whether or not my child is benefiting from the content?

Play together. It makes it easier to watch, listen and talk to your child about the app. Trust your instincts, paying close attention to how your child speaks and behaves. If she talks back to the app while she's playing, or if she applies something she saw or learned after app time is over, then she's probably learning a valuable lesson or skill. Most importantly, talk with her about how the app makes her feel or how she can apply her experience to "real life."

How can I make sure each family member plays with apps that are appropriate for them?

It's normal for younger children to want to play the same games as their older siblings and peers (or even parents). Fortunately, there are tools that set limits on what content children can access and lists of apps organized by age range. You might also consider "family play" times when everyone gets a chance to suggest something that the whole group can play together. Finally, sometimes a child needs their parent to unplug too, so don't let screen time become a substitute for doing other things together.
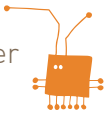
Recommended reading

Common Sense Media provides information and advice about raising media-savvy children for parents, teachers, and policymakers. The site features ratings and reviews about apps and games, with a particular focus on educational games.

Children's Technology Review helps teachers, librarians, publishers and parents stay up to date on the latest digital products in the children's media market. Apps are reviewed by "picky teachers" with preschool or elementary school teaching experience.

The School Library Journal is a resource intended for librarians and educators, but you'll find many app reviews on the site that can be very helpful for parents interested in discovering and learning more about high-quality apps and digital books.

The Parents' Choice Foundation is a nonprofit guide to children's media and toys. Its Parents' Choice Award seals include mobile apps reviewed for age-appropriate content, activities and experiences, and notes on those intended to be used by children and parents together.

Founded by moms, **Moms With Apps** aims to help parents choose the best apps for their children. The site features developers committed to high standards for protecting children's privacy and building family-friendly options.

PBS Parents provides information on child development and early learning, as well as access to free games and activities. A special section on "Children and Media" offers tips and strategies on raising children in a digital age.

In 2014, **Zero to Three** issued a parenting resource called Screen Sense: Setting the Record Straight that offers researchbased guidelines for using digital media with children under three years old.

The **American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP)** recommends that parents establish "screen-free" zones at home by making sure there are no televisions, computers, or video games in children's bedrooms, and by turning off screens during meals.

In 2012, the **National Association for the Education of Young Children** and the **Fred Rogers Center** issued a joint position paper stating that when used intentionally and appropriately, digital media can be effective tools to support learning and development for young children.
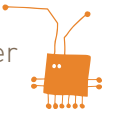
Citations

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