

Preschool and Technology: A Balancing Act

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Preschool and technology seem like disparate concepts but educators are now considering how to incorporate technology into the curriculum for our very youngest learners. I have been in the field of education for so long that I remember when the public school where I taught received a grant to buy the first Apple computers but the floppy disc software was no better than an electronic workbook and the electrical outlets in my classroom had to be upgraded to three-prong in order to plug them in. Now as a director of a preschool I am balancing the need for using technology in the classroom with developmentally appropriate practice.

Technology today surrounds us and has a profound affect on how children learn as well as how educators teach. Preschool teachers, looking to integrate a variety of technologies into the curriculum, have been using digital cameras, recorders with headphones, and computers with very young children. These educators are seeing very young children coming to school with a comfortable understanding of technology. Three year old children know how to navigate apps on I-Phones, use the remote to change channels, and play video games. The homes from which our children come are loaded with electronic devices and preschools should reflect the culture of the families they serve. Educators are aware that these children will encounter rapid changes in technology as a part of their lives and there is a need to start now to prepare them for learning expectations in a future where change will be a significant characteristic of literacy and education. Yet the research on the impact of technology on our children's overall development has been slow in coming from the academic community. Is the early use of technology harmful or beneficial? With limited data available, it is our responsibility to balance our technology offerings for young children. What this means in practice is using technology in age appropriate ways and in age appropriate time frames.

Children at ages three and four need socialization skills much more than they need to acquire knowledge in particular content areas. Preschool educators know that time spent with technology must not take away from time spent teaching children how to share, play with a friend, or listen to a story. Rather it should complement and enhance the learning process. Therefore we have developed strategies to add technology to the curriculum in user friendly initiatives.

Although some experts would recommend little or no exposure to electronic technology in preschool settings, this view is impractical and belies the fact that when used appropriately screen media can enhance the preschool experience. The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends no screen time for children under the age of two.

In our school, we follow the AAP recommendations and neither television nor computer screen time is included in the Noah's Ark program for our children under the age of two. For children three years and up, television is rarely used in our preschool classrooms and

only when the content is directly related to curriculum. For example, when the Jr-K children were studying nutrition the teacher incorporated a video with a singing and dancing apple. In kindergarten and in Jr-K classrooms computer usage is monitored by an adult at all times. The content is usually reading or math games and children do not have access to the Internet. The Internet access in the classrooms, by teachers only, can be a powerful research tool, but adult guidance is essential to assist young children in finding information and thinking about it critically.

New this year is the use of the iPod Touch with our Pre-K three-year old children. For the uninitiated, the iPod Touch looks just like a cell phone, but it cannot be used for calls. It is actually a mini-computer with games inside. The games are called applications, or apps. The apps we downloaded include a matching game, a shapes puzzle and, my favorite: an animated shofar that when tapped, blows the different calls to worship! Pre-K three-year old children use the iPod Touch once a week for 15-20 minutes. We have found the iPod Touch an effective tool to introduce technology to our youngest learners. It is a tool, another way to deliver information. Since the technology changes more rapidly than we can teach it, our three-year olds need to learn how to learn about technology and the iPod Touch serves this purpose.

Another aspect of rapidly changing technology is the fact that as new teachers coming out of college are hired, they are more attuned to the use of technology in the classroom. These young teachers have never known life without a cell phone and are passionate about connecting students to technology, not for the use of technology itself, but as another teaching tool. Our veteran teachers are experts with a rich base of knowledge and experience and are enthusiastically learning to use new technologies with which to communicate with parents, set up class web pages and use the Internet as an instant reference tool for curious minds. Teachers also know enough not to assume that all children in our classrooms have computers at home. Although many children have technology in their lives, many others do not. Teachers scaffold knowledge - build upon what a child knows - in all subject areas, even technology.

If today's preschoolers all come from families who spend time on screens, then we need to adapt them in age appropriate ways to become learning tools. The balance lies in the way the technology is used, not in the technology itself.

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