

DEVICES AND DESIRES

➊ THERE ARE MANY BRILLIANT APPS FOR TEACHING AND LEARNING OUT THERE, BUT HOW CAN YOU BE SURE YOU'VE FOUND ONE THAT'S SAFE TO DOWNLOAD AND USE? JUSTIN SMITH HAS SOME ADVICE...



ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Justin Smith is founder and CEO at the Educational App Store, which rates and reviews learning applications against a set of pedagogical criteria and academic research. Its findings are designed to make it easier for teachers, students and parents to discover apps that suit their needs

As children become more aware of developing technology, their confidence in using devices like smartphones and tablets grows. They're more clued up than ever before on what apps are available, and know what they're looking for in terms of games and learning tools. That growing confidence is being helped by parents, as many families are now choosing to give children access to these devices, in the hope that they will keep them entertained and mentally stimulated. With the continued adoption of mobile devices in schools, teachers can also take responsibility for helping youngsters' development in terms of their confidence in using tablets. Developers are involved in the process, too, as the apps that they create are helping youngsters learn and become more proficient.

But the increased ease with which youngsters are now using mobile devices puts them at risk in terms of e-safety, with two of the biggest concerns being the possible passing on of personal information, and incurring unforeseen charges for using certain features in an app.

So whenever children are interacting with apps, in whatever setting, it's important that there are certain parameters in place: the apps should be age appropriate; should not allow for the possibility of in-app purchasing; and should not enable any private information to be passed on.

Developing issues

The process starts with developers – it's vital that they are explicit in their detail about the actual content of an app and what it offers. It should be clear whether or not an app is completely free to use, and information on what happens when certain links are followed or buttons clicked should be explicit. Developers have to make it clear whether or not additional charges will be incurred by using certain features.

Software giant Apple recently introduced new rules for developers who are creating apps specifically aimed at children. The rules state that apps must include a privacy policy, and all advertising must be appropriate and not based on the user's behaviour within the app. Developers must also make sure that the apps that are designed for children fall inside one of three age brackets – under five, six to eight, and nine to 11 – and apps in the children's section must also ensure parental permissions have been granted or use a parental gate before allowing the user to "engage in commerce". More developers should be setting out rules like this. It makes the apps transparent to the user, with parents, teachers and the students themselves able to see exactly what's in an app and how it can be used.

There's also a chance that with some apps, locations will be picked up and passed on – for example, in social networking apps, as some have a location-sharing feature. Multi-player apps that use gaming networks to connect players can also expose kids to safety and privacy issues or cyber bullying. Adults can make an informed choice about whether or not they are comfortable using apps of this type. But it's not appropriate for children to have access to them, as they could leave them open to the chance of personal information being passed on.

Home learning

Parents are an important part of the equation, of course. A recent Ofcom report revealed 91 per cent of tablet owners give their children access to apps that they use, or let them choose apps of their own. And of that number,

71 per cent of children use a tablet to play games. It's important for parents to decide how they want to approach the issue and which parameters they want to set. Will children be allowed to access everything on the tablet or smartphone? Or will there be restrictions? Parents have to think carefully about what's on their devices to begin with and should ask the question – would I really want my child to be using that app? Setting up parental controls and creating restricted profiles makes it difficult for children to use any apps they shouldn't have access to. Parents should also think about loading up a tablet or phone with apps that offer safety and privacy features. Schools can help with getting this message across.

Recent research carried out by Windows Phone revealed that children making in-app purchases without their parents' knowledge has added over £30m to UK smartphone and tablet bills. There have been some recent negative stories about particularly large charges – including one about a five-year-old who accidentally rang up a £1,700 bill through an iPad app, and another about the mistaken purchase of £1,000-worth of virtual doughnuts – and there appears to be a continued low level charge of around £34 extra every month due to kids buying apps or making in-game purchases.

So what can be done to make these apps safer and to prevent, or at least reduce, the amount rung up accidentally by children? The problem is that often, the applications themselves are free, but there are add-ons that are offered as in-app purchases, and also first or third party advertising, with adverts popping on screen as the app is being used. Before installing an app, therefore, it's a good idea to do some research on it, and to make sure there's clarity on what's free and what's not. In most cases, purchasing the app outright or upgrading it to its full version will eliminate the ads, and will remove any additional on-screen temptation.

Parents can also add their own restrictions to stop children getting into certain apps and anything that would offer the opportunity to download at a cost, by setting up restrictions using a different passcode from the one that is

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used already. Third party apps, which let you protect certain apps on a tablets without locking down access to your entire device, are also available.

Classroom action

Teachers who are already using mobile devices are very instrumental in what type of content will learners be using. Before any apps are downloaded, it's vital that rules and boundaries are set. Of course, there's always the risk that they will be broken, but it's important that information is passed on. Teachers should think about rules for limiting screen time, and should take time to explain why it's not acceptable to link into in-app ads – also looking at what in-game charges are.

In short, teachers, parents and developers should work together to make information on apps more accessible and transparent. Doing your homework on the issue; using specialist educational app stores (like the EducationalAppStore.com) – where all the essential criteria are checked before apps are listed; taking time to choose apps that suit the needs of students; and thinking carefully about how useful they're going to be in an educational environment will all help youngsters keep safe.

7 top apps for safe teaching and learning

ALL THESE APPS HAVE BEEN GIVEN TOP RATING BY THE EAS TEAM OF REVIEWERS, WHICH INCLUDES PARENTS, TEACHERS AND STUDENTS

1. **The Educational App Store**
play.google.com/store/apps/details?id=educationalappstore.eas
2. **Kids Place – Parental Control**
www.educationalappstore.com/app/kids-place-parental-control
3. **Maps of our World**
www.educationalappstore.com/app/8722/maps-of-our-world
4. **Sounds the Pronunciation**
www.educationalappstore.com/app/1291/sounds-the-pronunciation-app
5. **Clicker Docs**
www.educationalappstore.com/app/8500/clicker-docs
6. **GazziliMath**
www.educationalappstore.com/app/8541/gazzilimath
7. **Khan Academy**
www.educationalappstore.com/app/1127/khan-academy