



Laguna Beach Language & Speech Clinic
Helping Children and Empowering Parents
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To App or Not To App...That is the Educational Question!

Lynn Epstein, MS, SLP-CCC

With apps all over, everywhere, it's hard not to avoid them. Apps do have a place in education and therapy, for all ages and special needs. There are plenty of apps that make it fun to learn, that help captivate an audience that may otherwise look away. However, it's imperative to investigate and qualify the apps for desired outcomes and intended audience. I had a client who told me his doctor recommended he download a "speech app" for his son. My client downloaded it and laughed because the app featured an animated chicken. An animal with no lips, but it's going to show a child how to say his sounds. Yeah. So a little research before you buy is worthy because studies do show that children and adults with language learning differences, autism and special needs find apps to be especially motivating and are effective tools for teaching. In addition, apps make it easier to augment communication for nonverbal clients and get them engaged with their environment.

In the vast world of apps, here are my top 7 tips for selecting your educational app:

1. What's it for? Decide which subject area you wish to target. Be specific in your selection; improved phonics, reading comprehension, math skills, literacy support, social skills, etc.
2. This may seem obvious, but parents should know the contents and how an app works before letting their kids use one. The graphic and title may look cool but could be misleading. Like the title, Ladybug Learns Letters, seems great. After downloading it, you realize it is early sound recognition but its matching Swahili letters to Greek ones.
3. If you are going the education route, is your app research-based? Check the information and read the fine print to see if there is any evidence based research supporting the claims of the app. This means the company has done studies and results indicate that students/clients learned targeted goals with this application. Like a speech app with a chicken who teaches sound formulation may be questionable as a chicken h has no lips, teeth or jaw to provide a good visual plus not sure what the feedback would sound like!
4. When hunting for the right app, check the special education section in iTunes. Use references from educational and family friendly organizations, like autismspeaks.org. KinderTown offers to help you find the best educational apps for children ages 3-6. Education Apps Review is a community that comes together to review and rate educational apps. SNApps4Kids has over a thousand reviews of apps for children with special needs. Appolocious also helps you find educational apps. SpeechPathologyApps.com or "The SLP Apps List" may be a good starting resource.



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5. Apps are more motivating when they include reinforcement and feedback. This may be in the form of laughter, sound effects or moving to the next level. Positive parent feedback is still the most powerful. Even when it's, "Whoa, that was tricky but I like the way you keep trying".

6. Many great apps are \$3.00 or less. You may want to try the "lite" versions first to see if it goes the way they say it does. Less money, feels better but remember, these versions are loaded with pop ups so if you do decide to go with it, do get the entire package so you can be free of distracting entities.

7. Too much eye candy can make you sick. While visual effects are awesome be aware that too much visual stimulation may be counterproductive. Too many distractors get in the way of learning and can actually get your kids into a more fidgety state. Because the light on the screen stimulates the brain and will hamper the release of melatonin, shut down all electronic devices at least 2 hours before bedtime so it doesn't interfere with sleep hygiene.

Bottom line: Do the homework. Apps can have a place in education and be useful tools for learning reinforcing new skills. But, I also think interactive engaging parents are the greatest app of all.

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