

The age of a child determines the kind of play he/she will engage in, for example, solitary play, constructive play, parallel play, and so on. Many of these conceptualisations tend to consider play as a universal construct unfolding in predictable ways as per the child's biological age. However, what is missing from this thinking is how the increasing access to new media technologies and tools, such as tablets, mobile phones and computers, has altered play opportunities for children.

In the last year, with the pandemic imposing restrictions on mobility, digital play has become firmly entrenched as an alternative to traditional play, flagging the concerns of teachers and parents regarding increased screen time. While these are genuine concerns, it may not be wise to reject the idea of digital play altogether. Instead, we must think of it as another form of play that children need to savour in moderation.

In this article, I aim to introduce the readers to digital play as a novel and emerging play in the early years. I intend to provide a primer to digital play and explain its benefits in early learning. Lastly, I elaborate on the role that early childhood educators can play in fostering digital play in the classroom and beyond. Keeping in mind the cruel reality of the digital divide and unequal access to digital devices that pose a barrier to digital play, I attempt to make suggestions that do not require sophisticated technologies.

Digital play and learning

As teachers, we have students interested in understanding topics such as the solar system, dinosaurs or airplanes. With limited class time and too many things to cover, these explorative topics tend to take a backseat. In situations like these, technology can come to aid and enable the child to traverse a different world.

Immersive digital play, or simply put, play that is self-directed, provides children with an opportunity to fulfil their quest for knowledge while being at 'play'. Based on the premise that young children are active users of technology, digital play provides them with opportunities to engage with digital

games, puzzles, blocks, open-ended sandbox and pretend games. These encounters enable children to indulge both in imaginary as well as real-life situations. It is this potential of digital play to connect the social and imaginary worlds of the child that is its essence. Digital play can be of many different types depending upon the kind of application or device used (see table 1).

Just as traditional play supports learning, digital play enables children to develop a broad set of skills. A study by the Lego Foundation (2020) with around 3500 respondents from South Africa and the UK found a positive correlation between digital play and learning. The researchers found that learning through digital play can be both intentional and unintended and that playing online games supports holistic development among children in the following ways:

1. It can lead to gains in subject knowledge where children have opportunities to play games on mathematical concepts, phonemic awareness and word-building. Playing games that relate closely to the school curriculum fosters learning.
2. Some games allow multiple players and provide an option to children to play with their peers both online and offline. This enhances collaboration among them as they work together towards a common goal or the solution to a problem.
3. Online role-playing games provide the option to children to choose from an array of digital avatars, such as shopkeeper, farmer, teacher, beautician and so on. Playing such games can help children understand the everyday tasks and challenges of people from diverse walks of life.
4. Digital play leads to improvement in concentration, memory and problem-solving skills and enhances creativity among children. It also helps build patience and the need to wait for one's turn.
5. In a world mediated by technology, digital play provides the first lessons in digital literacy to young children, which may be helpful to them in future.

6. Playing on digital devices also develops a sense of independence and agency among children as they navigate various apps and make decisions.

Choosing an application

With a software update here and a new app (application) there, the digital world is ever expansive and exploding. Given so many options to choose from, it is natural for teachers to feel confused in selecting an appropriate app. A few tips that can help them pick appropriate apps for their students:

1. If the app is over-structured, repetitive and predictable, it may offer minimal choices to the learners and hinder their imagination.
2. The app must provide an opportunity to the learner to manipulate, explore and unleash his/her creativity. The thumb rule for selecting any app is to ensure that it allows children to 'create' and not simply 'consume.'
3. Applications that allow collaboration and are not limited to a single-user interface are better as communicating and engaging with friends, peers, family members, and teachers in digital spaces is equally essential as otherwise.
4. The design, setting, characters and language should not contain hidden biases nor promote stereotypes.
5. Given the concern that digital play does not

involve physical activity, you may want to select those that require some physical movement in their design interface.

Role of teachers

Teachers have to assume multiple roles when introducing and engaging with digital play. One of these roles can be that of a facilitator who provides technological resources and spaces for children to play digitally. Or it may be of an instructor who gives direct instructions when children need to perform a specific task. It can also be that of a supporter who provides encouragement and feedback to children as they play online. Whatever the role, the first and perhaps the most essential step is for you to be friends with technology and take an active interest in exploring it. A teacher must explore the app/game thoroughly before recommending it to the learners.

Encourage students to play alone or in pairs and groups depending upon the time and availability of resources. Above all, take this opportunity to talk to the students about being safe in an online world and always discussing with an adult before they download any new app. Teachers must also take this as an opportunity to educate and support parents to employ technology in developmentally and contextually appropriate ways with their children. Technology is here to stay and so let digital play be a first step for our children to embrace it.

Table 1. Types of digital play

Types	Description
Exploratory	Involves children in first-hand experiences of exploring, experimenting and problem-solving using digital devices to help them become more confident at using them. Giving students a smartphone or a tablet to take pictures of their environment can classify as exploratory digital play.
Imaginative	Having children incorporate digital devices to introduce them to a theme or a topic they have not experienced before. For example, helping children view images in 3D (available free on Google) to evoke their imagination or letting them play out a scenario from an app.
Game-based	Games or apps built around various subjects, including science, mathematics, literacy and language to foster subject-based learning, critical thinking, and problem-solving.
Creative	Provides opportunities for students to engage in apps that allow them to produce digital artwork, drawings or movies. These may be included as a part of students' portfolios and can foster social-emotional development.

Table 2. Some game/app suggestions

Key development area	Suggestions
Game-based learning	An Indian app for early learning, <i>Kutuki</i> offers a range of topics in regional languages. You may also stick to popular choices such as <i>Minecraft</i> and <i>Scratch</i> to offer fundamentals of programming, teamwork and problem-solving.
Creative digital play	<i>Microsoft Fresh Paint</i> and <i>Sketches</i> are free apps for children to draw, sketch or doodle online. For photo editing, the <i>Pixlr</i> photo editor has preloaded image tools for children to edit their images.
Diversity	To introduce children to topics such as refugees and diversity, apps such <i>Our Global Kids</i> , <i>Against all odds</i> , <i>Darfur is Dying</i> are useful.
Digital storytelling	Developed by Laureate Professor Marilyn Flear at Monash University, <i>Conceptual Playworld</i> helps educators to develop imaginary scenarios inspired by a children’s book or a fairy tale for children to go on imaginary journeys and solve challenges while being at play.

References

Marsh et al. 2020. Children, Technology and Play. Billund, Denmark: The LEGO Foundation. https://www.legofoundation.com/media/2965/children-tech-and-play_full-report.pdf



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