



Play & learn

Apps can help kids learn while having fun

By now, most kids are back in school and the summer of 2012 is fading fast. Let the learning begin.

But what about the kids who are too young for school? Shouldn't they be learning, too? Thanks to the wonderful world of apps, kids don't have to be in school to learn, and learning can be fun.

There are thousands of educational apps available for mobile devices and the quality varies greatly. Fortunately, there are organizations that rate apps to help you find the worthwhile ones.



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InSites

Elmo Loves ABCs

The Parents' Choice Foundation is a nonprofit group of

parents, educators and other experts that rates children's media. One of the apps it recommends for preschoolers is Elmo Loves ABCs from Sesame Workshop.

This app is pretty much what you would expect from the kid-friendly folks at Sesame Street. The bright and colorful interface features everybody's favorite monster as your host. Elmo cheerfully guides kids through the alphabet using various interactive games.

Pick a letter and you're presented with several options after you first trace the letter with your finger. There are videos of various objects that begin with the letter, such as an apple for A, or a banana for B. Each letter also has images that can be colored in. The finished art can be saved

so you can print or share it. Additionally there's a hide and seek game for each letter. Objects are hidden behind different backgrounds, such as leaves or balloons, that can be cleared away with your finger.

The app also features an animated alphabet song. While young kids will find it entertaining, I was surprised by the poor quality of some of the images in it. I expect nothing but the best from Sesame Street. Overall, this app is well done, preschoolers will enjoy playing with it, and they will learn something in the process.

Monkey Preschool Lunchbox

Common Sense Media is another nonprofit that rates apps for kids. Monkey Preschool Lunchbox by THUP Games LLC is recommended by the group for young children.

This app presents a series of games that teach kids about counting, colors, shapes, matching, letters and more. Solving a game puts food in a monkey's lunchbox, causing him to flip and cheer. After solving several games successfully, you're rewarded with virtual stickers.

Young kids probably will have a lot of fun playing with this app. The artwork is well done and the interface needs no instructions. The games just keep coming and changing. I'm not sure if the game ever ends, I think you just turn it off when you've had enough.

Monster Physics

Older kids need to take a break from schoolwork every now and then, but that doesn't mean they have to stop learning. Monster Physics from Dan Russell-Pinson is

designed to entertain users aged 10 to 110. While they're playing they also learn about physics, that is if physics involved monsters.

You start by building a monster from the collections of bodies, arms, legs, etc. Once your monster is created you have to help him accomplish missions, such as jumping ramps or getting food. Your monster needs to use various contraptions to complete the missions. Your job is to build or modify the machines to help him achieve his goals.

You can choose from a variety of spare parts, including joints, motors, propellers, rockets and various other thingamajigs to build your Rube Goldberg-like devices. The trick is that all the pieces are affected by physics, such as gravity, thrust and momentum. You have to learn to anticipate the movements that will be caused by each element you add to your invention.

The combination of a video game atmosphere and the need for ingenuity creates an addictive experience. The graphics and interface are well done, which makes the experience more enjoyable. The game provides tutorials to help you learn how the different parts function.

Apps have opened up a whole new frontier for education. The fact that kids eagerly embrace mobile devices make them effective tools for helping children learn. The hard part for parents is sifting through all the options to find quality apps that have a positive impact.

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