

New Media Resources for App Evaluation Basic Framework & Tips for Librarians

Recommending apps for children can seem daunting at first, even for seasoned librarians because of the newness of the format. With apps, it can be helpful to ‘expect the unexpected’ when reviewing. Evaluators need to watch for hidden features, test basic settings thoroughly and be mindful of the impact of updates (or lack thereof) on content over time. To get started:

- **Create a Rubric** (Use criteria based on “Intended Use”)
- **Find a Rubric Online** - [Learning in Hand](http://learninginhand.com/blog/ways-to-evaluate-educational-apps.html) has a list of pre-made rubrics for a variety of educational uses: <http://learninginhand.com/blog/ways-to-evaluate-educational-apps.html>
- **Use [Every Child Ready to Read](#)** – The Five Practices (sing, play, talk, read, write) make a great guide or starting point for the evaluation process, as an early literacy framework when focusing on young children.
- **Consider the Goal** - Digital is just one tool among many, not always best (don't use apps just for the sake of using an app in your programs).
- **Consider the Context, Content and Child(ren)** ~ [Lisa Guernsey, Screen Time](#)
- **Test Every App** thoroughly before sharing it with a child. Look for ease of use, stability and ample settings that include navigation and flexibility for a variety of uses.
- **Use Developmentally Appropriate Guidelines** as a litmus test when selecting apps, for instance:
 - **Birth to 2** – Focus is on relationship with caregivers, so look for apps that connect/engage children with a caregiver, but use judiciously. Don't forget to consider the caregiver's engagement as a way to enhance any of 5 practices.
 - **Age 3-6** – Focus is on relationships, including peers. Look for engagement with others, dialogic reading opportunities, turn-taking, etc., as well as literacy supports like highlighting word-for-word in eBooks & apps.
 - **Age 7-11** – Focus is still on relationships, but it is also important to consider engagement with subjects the child enjoys. This helps to foster a love of learning and reading, essential at this age when many avid readers become reluctant. Finding apps that go deeper into non-fiction topics, or support socio-emotional development, is ideal. School-aged app selection can also be guided by common core, but home use should be child-driven as much as possible.
 - **Age 12+** – Adolescents are developmentally tasked with the “Four I's” (independence, identity, integrity and intimacy) but they are also Icebergs (much goes on below the surface, often expressed in a need of privacy). Give them plenty of choices from quality content that builds on these skills. Apps that teach them how to protect themselves and manage their own digital citizenship are also good choices. Content creation for self-expression is particularly important for this age group.
- **Draw on Criteria for Evaluating Paper Books**, adding new ones for a new medium, like in this table presented by Carisa at annual ALA, 2014 during [ECRR 2.0: Using Apps & eBooks in Early Literacy Programs](#):

Criteria Consistent Across Formats	New Criteria to Consider for Digital
High Quality Illustrations	Relevant enhancements that support narrative
Easy to Read, Large Font	Seamless integration of features & enhancements.
Developmentally Appropriate Content (Length, Reading Level, Topics, Language)	Audio & Sound effects that don't interfere with voice-over or other features.
Well-written, nicely paced & chunked text	Technical polish, stability, ease of use & navigation settings, flexible use.

High Quality Content (not thinly disguised advertisement for game, movie, food, etc.)	No ads, in-app purchases & links that leave the app (unless under sufficient 'parental gate').
Engaging content worthy of many return visits	Clearly identified author/illustrator/producer.
Ways to extend beyond the book	Quality games or other extras (if present) that do not interrupt narrative or reading comprehension.

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Tips - Important things to watch out for in the digital environment:

- **Coercive monetization** – In-app purchases are not all created equally. If present in apps for children, then they should be under a parental gate and for older kids, not disguised in any way to confuse or encourage purchases.
- **Links** – Especially in apps for young children, any links that leave the app without a parental gate should be avoided when possible. Put device in airport mode or use guided access if links are present in an app you consider quality in all other ways.
- **Advertisements** – Ads, even for other apps in a series should be tucked away under a parental gate, especially for ages 8 and under.
- **Privacy Policy** – Apps are required to not collect or share identifiable information from kids under 13, so look for basic COPPA compliance. [Children's Online Privacy Protection Act]
- **Poor Quality** – In the self-publishing environment, watch out for apps with grammatical errors, poor translations, clunky interfaces, and other technical glitches. Aggressively test apps and all their features.
- **Updates** – Digital apps are updated regularly for free, including the addition of features and content. Storytime can be thrown off by changes in the app's content or navigation, especially when the addition is unwelcome (like ads or new in-app purchases). OS (Operating System) updates also can change the way an app functions, especially if the app is not well supported with stability updates.
- **Easter Eggs** – Some surprises in digital are meant to be pleasant, like the 'easter eggs' or hidden enhancements that many developers put into their digital content. For instance, Pat the Bunny includes literal Easter eggs during the weeks leading up to Easter in an update that is seasonal.
- **Aging Apps/App Rot** – As digital content ages, it can become unstable or even, in rare cases, removed from the AppStore entirely. Some content is removed by the publisher for business reasons, but most content that is removed is simply unsupported by the developer when they go out of business in this fast changing environment. This means that any content that is not currently installed on a device cannot be reinstalled from the AppStore unless you have backed up the device to a computer (not a common practice).

Where to find good apps:

The AppStore can provide some initial suggestions, but most of the time you will need to leave for outside sources online. Aggregator sites, like Appshopper.com are useful for tracking a wish list and watching for price drops, especially on Fridays and holidays, but for deeper curation, there are many sites to consider:

Non-Profit/Traditional Book Review Sites:

- **Common Sense Media** – Excellent overall resource for media reviews, especially the new app/site called Graphite, which includes alignment for common core.
- **Children's Technology Review** – Subscription based site recommended for all libraries, using a thorough rubric for children's media across formats.

- **Kirkus Reviews** – iPad app & ebook reviews are done in a similar fashion to their print reviews, including their coveted 'Kirkus Star'. Children's book apps are not separated out from adult content, however.
- **Horn Book** – Now including weekly reviews for apps & ebooks for kids.
- **SLJ, Touch & Go Blog** – A weekly publication reviewing school-aged apps.

Commercial Review Sites - Seek out trusted/respected sites with clear info about their review process. This is a short list of sites to consider, but by no means exhaustive.

- <http://digital-storytime.com>
- <http://smartappsforkids.com>
- <http://theimum.com/>
- <https://www.appolearning.com/>
- <http://www.appymall.com/>
- <http://bestappsforkids.com/>
- <http://www.funeducationalapps.com/>
- <http://www.kindertown.com/>
- <https://SmartappsforAndroid.com/>
- <http://teacherswithapps.com/>
- <http://theiphonemom.com/>

Note: When seeking review, authors & developers often look for sites with low Alexa ratings (a rating system that measures website popularity - the lower the rank, the more traffic a site likely gets) and an active list (updated daily) of the most popular kids app review sites & general app websites can be found at ReviewforDev.com:

Kids App Review Sites: <http://www.reviewfordev.com/list-of-review-sites-to-find-the-best-educational-apps-for-kids.php>

All App Review Sources:

<http://www.reviewfordev.com/ipad-and-iphone-app-review-sites-the-list-to-promote-ios-apps.php>

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