A focus on digital play

Digital play is a relatively new concept that is creating an increasingly blurred boundary between traditional play activities and digital interactions. Read how one kindergarten blends a range of play activities seamlessly. Look into the latest research on young children and digital technology. Find some good checklists to record what children are learning.

Case study: Blending forms of play ...

An education-focused program of apps forms the basis of how children at Anzac Terrace Primary School Kindergarten in Perth explore digital content and digital play. Educator Sue DeWitt explains how she has implemented the ELLA program over a number of years.

Early Learning Languages Australia (ELLA) is a digital, play-based language learning program for children in preschool. Children in the ELLA program learn language through apps called The Polyglots. The apps are used on tablet devices and have been specifically designed for preschool children. They are currently available in nine languages: Arabic, Chinese (Mandarin), French, Hindi, Indonesian, Italian, Japanese, Modern Greek or Spanish. German and Vietnamese will also be available from Term 1 in 2018.

In 2015, the Anzac Terrace kindergarten signed up for the ELLA program with the aims of exposing children to a second language and deepening the range of cultural experiences on offer. The language they chose was Indonesian, which they have stayed with for four years so far.

The children access the ELLA apps through iPads, which are kept in the ‘Indonesian corner’ of the kindergarten. Children access the iPads as they would other learning resources such as the block corner, Tuff Tray, or writing corner.
Reinforcing ELLA apps with other games and activities

Each ELLA app focuses on a topic (such as the beach, the circus). Sue DeWitt says:

‘In my Indonesian corner I always try to have games/activities that reinforce the apps, such as sorting fruit or playing a memory game, and which children can play away from the iPad. Children play very freely between the online games of the app and the associated artefacts in the Indonesian corner and beyond. For example, there is a circus tent in one of the apps, so I set a circus up with some props, wigs, clown noses, etcetera for the children to use while playing on the iPads and also just to use without the iPads.’

Sorting fruit and playing memory games are some of Sue’s other examples that tie in with specific ELLA apps.

‘I try to create the games outside of the iPad,’ she says, ‘so it gives the children the opportunity to use Indonesian language.’

ELLA apps support education programming

From an education programming point of view, Sue is very supportive of the apps.

‘They are linked to The Early Years Framework. I find that these apps are great to reinforce the kindy skills and concepts that we introduce throughout the year – greetings, colours, shapes, numbers 1–10, body parts, likes/dislikes, fruits. Through interacting with the games, children develop fine motor skills as they use their fingers to manoeuvre the characters, go through mazes, draw pictures, etcetera.’

More benefits

- Children practise the skills of matching, and sorting in many learning experiences in the apps.
- The apps also have activities to foster development of gross motor skills.
- Children will often interact, and share the iPad, as they play a game.

Sharing the iPads equally

At the beginning of the year, children have to get their iPad licence, and a timer is used to ensure that the iPads are shared equitably. As the year proceeds, however, this becomes unnecessary. Sharing can extend to parents. Sometimes the iPads are out as one of the table activities in the morning when parents arrive and they can complete activities with the children.

Using the iPads as an extra tool

Sue is selective about the digital content and tools that she uses with children. Next term she will have a couple of iPads out for children to use to take photos of their work.

‘We do a lot of dry collage, block building, play dough, great Lego buildings, etc. Before they get packed away children can take a photo of their work.’

More benefits

- The ELLA apps assist with language, as there are opportunities for children to use the microphone and repeat words in Indonesian, and to hear back exactly what they have said, and how they said it.
- The apps reinforce visual discrimination, for instance when children find characters in the hide and seek game, or recognise things by colour.
- The Digital Play Framework – Camera Observations checklist is a useful tool to channel reflections about how children are using particular functions of a camera.

Enhancing the kindergarten program in other ways

In addition to the iPads, Sue uses multimedia content such as YouTube clips to enhance her program.

‘I use Brain Breaks, Songs and movement, exercises, etcetera. This term my theme has been Travelling around the World. Each week I set up an aeroplane and the children go flying to a different country. I try to make it as real as possible. We all have suitcases (parcel post boxes which they collaged) passports, boarding passes and tickets.’
The children go to the ticket counter, get their boarding passes, go through security, get their bags scanned, and so on.

‘Once on the plane we watch a safety procedure according to the airline we are using, then a take-off and landing. When we flew to India we watched a clip of going through the Taj Mahal, and when we flew to America I set the chairs up like a rollercoaster ride in front of the whiteboard and then I showed this fantastic clip of the New York New York ride in Vegas and children pretended to go on the ride. The excitement on the children’s faces was priceless!!!’

Four years of building expertise, using ELLA

The kindergarten has had four years of experience – blending digital devices and play with other learning experiences. Of this, Sue says:

‘What the ELLA apps have taught me (and I would probably recommend this to any early childhood teacher using digital technology in their classroom) is to become really familiar with the apps you introduce to your students and to extend them into their learning environment. The iPad does not stand alone in my classroom. There is not play and then the iPads.’

Ultimately, as originally hoped, the end result has been significant engagement in language learning and in Indonesian culture.

‘The apps are great; they are so early childhood friendly and it’s amazing how the children pick up the language. I mean, they might not learn a huge vocab but just the exposure is fantastic for children. Only last Thursday, as one of my younger children was going home, instead of saying goodbye he said ‘Sampai jumpa!’ (see you later).’

Register your interest for the 2019 ELLA program here. From 2019, ELLA will also be trialled in Foundation to Year 2 in up to 300 primary schools.

Screen time and kids: what’s happening in our homes?

The 2017 Australian Child Health Poll found that 36 per cent of Australian preschoolers (birth to age five) had their own touchscreen device. Parents/caregivers reported that infants and toddlers used screen-based devices for 14 hours per week. Australian children aged 2–5 years used screen-based devices for 26 hours per week. This report provides an up-to-date picture of patterns of use of screen-based technology by Australian children and their families.
Towards an Early Childhood Australia Statement on young children and digital technology: Discussion paper

A recent Early Childhood Australia (ECA) survey found that the most popular issue relating to use of digital technology was the following: **Guidance on positive use – play and pedagogy**. Educators were looking for advice about:

- what constitutes good pedagogical practice using digital technology
- using technology as a tool and resource in a positive, purposeful way; and clarity about what this looks like
- guidance on applications and technologies
- guidance on a language to communicate with others about why opportunities to use digital technology are important for young children
- training for early childhood educators.

To what extent do you think that you and your colleagues have worked through some or all of these issues? What has helped you to make progress, to feel more confident?

What do you think about young children and digital technology use?

Within the ECA survey, attitudes were split.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statements about attitudes towards young children and digital technology use</th>
<th>Strongly disagree or disagree</th>
<th>Neither agree or disagree</th>
<th>Agree or strongly agree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Young children do not need to be skilled users of digital technologies</td>
<td>49%</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>35%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acquiring technology skills will assist a young child in the future</td>
<td>52%</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>37%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Digital technologies have great potential benefits for young children’s learning</td>
<td>52%</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>37%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Early learning services are appropriate places for children to acquire skills in using digital technologies.</td>
<td>58%</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>28%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Read more about the findings of the survey in the discussion paper prepared by ECA, which includes a literature review as well.

Access the recently launched Statement on young children and digital technologies. It provides an overview of existing research about young children and digital technologies in the following areas:

- Relationships
- Health and wellbeing
- Citizenship
- Play and pedagogy.

Guiding principles and ‘practice advice’ accompany each of these areas.
Digital play
This brief article explores the emerging field of digital play within a context of the use of technologies over time. It includes useful questions to be considered for further research and outlines five implications for parents, services and policy.

The Digital Play Framework and the exploration of technology tools: guest blog
This article explores how the Digital Play Framework might be used to map children's use of technology.

Digital Play Framework: observation checklists
Use this checklist to help you record general observations about children's use of digital devices. It is based on thinking behind the Digital Play Framework. You may also like to use checklists to reflect on how children are using:

- computers
- iPads

Digital play: a new classification
Existing theories of play are being used by researchers to define what and how young children play with digital technology. Research is also examining the increasingly blurred boundary between children's traditional play activities and digital interactions. This research paper explores digital play within the structure of an established taxonomy of sixteen play types developed by Hughes (2002).

Types of apps: a critical approach
This article includes three short videos featuring information about instructive apps, manipulable apps and constructive apps.

More about play
Why boredom is good for the brain, the power of mess making and much more are featured in this suite of 20 short videos about the topic of play.