



## Early Ed Watch

A Blog from New America's Early Education Initiative

### Updates from the Digital Frontier

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In the old world, children's media – namely television – was usually something to be passively absorbed at home. But today children are gaining access to media that encourages – no, requires – some interaction on their part. Couldn't that interaction bring with it the potential for harnessing that media to enrich children's learning in many promising ways, in and out of school?

A growing number of people in child development circles are starting to think so. In the past several months we've seen movement on at least several fronts. The Joan Ganz Cooney Center published a paper asking whether apps have potential as learning games, which we [discussed in a recent podcast](#). And the National Association for the Education of Young Children has been [working on a new position statement](#) related to young children and technology, which brought a packed crowd to a discussion session at the annual NAEYC meeting in November.

Just yesterday, the Fred Rogers Center convened a roundtable discussion hosted by the Erikson Institute in Chicago, which followed the announcement last fall from the U.S. Department of Education on the latest winners of Ready to Learn grants. Here are quick updates on those two projects:

#### **Fred Rogers Center's Roundtable Discussion**

About 30 people from around the country with expertise in child development and/or children's media descended on the Erikson Institute in Chicago yesterday (thankfully held a day ahead of today's Midwest snow storm). The [Fred Rogers Center for Early Learning and Children's Media at Saint Vincent College](#) convened the group to provide advice on building a framework for excellence in children's digital media.

The event brought together several media producers, such as Angela Santomero, co-founder of Out of the Blue Enterprises, which produces the P.B.S. show SuperWhy!, and Alan Gershenfeld, founder of E-Line, a publisher of game-based learning products and former chairman of Games for Change, a nonprofit that helps to rise the sector of computer and video games for social change. It also included some well-respected voices in developmental psychology and child development, including Barbara Bowman, professor at and co-founder of Erikson and early childhood director for the Chicago Public Schools; Jerlean Daniels, executive director of the National Association for the Education of Young Children; and Ellen Wartella, director of the Center on Media and Human Development at Northwestern University.

"What is the best role for these new technologies and media in early childhood settings?" asked Samuel J. Meisels, Erikson's president, at [the beginning of the day's discussion](#).

The roundtable's task was to start putting down some ideas and broad outlines for creators and parents who may be struggling to determine how to define quality amid the burgeoning number of products, websites, shows, social media outlets, immersive games and apps that are designed to both engage and excite children's learning.

Setting down parameters was anything but easy, and lively discussions, moderated by David Kleeman of the American Center on Children and the Media, included some provocative questions about whether a set of criteria is possible or even called for. Several producers described a hampering disconnect between research and industry and a need for a place to share insights. And many in the room – including myself speaking for the New America Foundation – pointed to a hunger among parents and educators for a way to make distinctions between media that is mediocre and misaligned with young children's needs versus media that is challenging, engaging and cognizant of the way young kids learn to learn.

#### **Ready to Learn Grants**

Last fall, the U.S. Department of Education announced [the winners](#) of the 2010 [Ready to Learn](#) Television competition, a grant program designed to promote high-quality, educational television and "transmedia storytelling" for children ages 2 to 8. Transmedia storytelling has been defined as producing stories that children can watch and interact with across multiple forms of media – including TV, websites, online games and mobile apps.

Three telecommunications companies received the grants, which total \$27 million to be spent over five years. The money is to be used for designing and producing programming, conducting research on its effectiveness and packaging it so that teachers and caregivers, if they wish, can use it in childcare, preschool, pre-k, kindergarten and early elementary classrooms.

In remarks at the time, Jacqueline Jones, advisor on early learning to U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan, stressed the emphasis between learning at home and learning in preschool settings and in early elementary school. "We are particularly excited," she said, "that through accessible media and technologies, these projects will encourage families, caregivers and teachers to interact with and engage young learners in both formal and informal settings."

The Department awarded about \$6.6 million to Window to the World Communications in Chicago, which will partner with W!

Idbrain to create mathematics content. Another \$6 million went to the Hispanic Information and Telecommunications Network in New York, which will create transmedia content to engage dual-language learners. And the Corporation for Public Broadcasting received \$14.6 million, to create immersive, 3-D literacy and numeracy games in conjunction with P.B.S.

Both the work of the Fred Rogers Center and the implementation of the Ready to Learn grants should offer insights into how to navigate the digital frontier when it comes to young children. We'll keep you posted on how these projects evolve.

#### SUGGESTED READING

Podcast: Apps, iPhones and Young Kids  
Screens, Kids and the NAEYC Position Statement  
Some Words on Webkinz: Can Digital Media Actually Help Emergent Readers?  
'Ready to Learn' Results: Children Gain Reading Skills From Two PBS Shows  
TV Research: Let's Get Smarter About What Young Children See, Hear and Experience

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