Making a game of research

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Tablet computers are being adopted by behavioural scientists at Norway's University of Stavanger (UiS) as a more efficient way of obtaining information from young children.

A new [data acquisition](#) app developed by NettOp, the university's department for web-based education, will not only save time for researchers but also be more involving for the youngsters.

Underlying this move is the increasingly frequent sighting of children playing with tablets or [smart phones](#) belonging to their parents.

The intuitive user-friendliness of a tablet's touch-sensitive screen means that infants as young as two or three years old can master the technology without difficulty.

This in turn has led to a minor [digital revolution](#) among the very youngest, to whom a tablet in the home is as natural as a picture book.

Guided by scientists

The new app will be used by the Centre for Behavioural Research at the UiS in its Ready for School (Skoleklar) project, which focuses on the transition from pre-school to infant classes.

Particular attention is being paid in this research to the way various factors influence learning and performance by children in early-years education.

The tablet-based system comprises six tasks which will assess children's word comprehension, reading, number comprehension, memory and self-regulation.

It will initially be used with children aged five-six in nursery school. Some of the tasks will be guided by the scientist, while others will be done by the children under the supervision of adults.

Competent children

"We see that kids are becoming competent with a tablet at a younger and younger age," says Petter Mordt, the app's creator. "But few scientists have made the move to this device yet."

NettOp, where Mordt works as a developer, specialises in producing content and solutions for web-based learning and communication.

The aim of the app is to find a way to enhance involvement by very young children, explains associate professor Ingunn Størksen at Centre for Behavioural Research. She came up with the idea because completing long assignments using pen and paper can be demanding for this age group. "I hope and believe this format can help," she adds.

Expecting electronics

"We've also used flash cards when collecting information from youngsters, and usually tell them they are doing something that's like a game.

"But they don't always understand that the cards are meant to remind them of a game. When we say 'game', they now expect something electronic."

As a reward after the assessment, the children will also be able to choose a simple game on the tablet in order to help maintain their concentration during data collection.

Innovative project

Registration and storage of the information obtained from the children will be easier with the tablet, Størksen points out.

"This approach demands quite a lot of resources during the development of the app, but can make everyday life much simpler for the people collecting the data and for the children taking part."

Both the researchers and the developers regard this as an innovative project, and that view is expressed by NettOp head Atle Løkken.

"I haven't heard of anyone doing anything similar, at least not in Norway," he says. "That's why we thought this project was particularly stimulating."

Provided by University of Stavanger

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