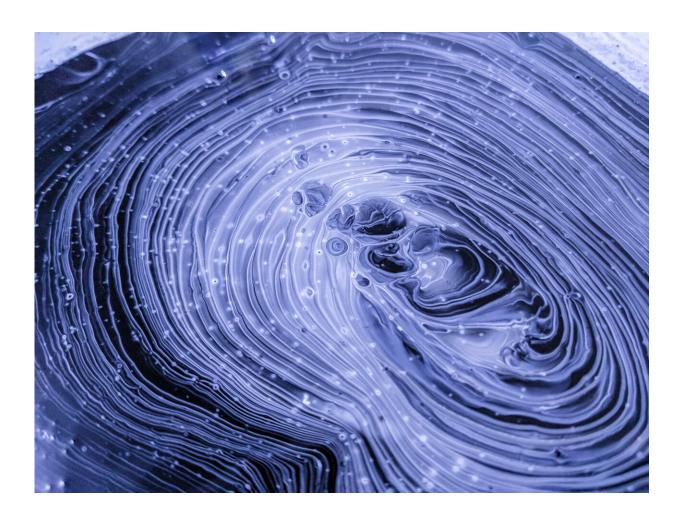# What we know about tablets and how your child learns to read

January 14 2015, by Natalia Kucirkova

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A recent US survey commissioned by the children's books publisher

Scholastic found that 65% of 6-11 year olds [prefer to read print books](#) even when e-books are available on tablets. In the UK, a National Literacy Survey found that children who read stories both on tablets and in print are [more likely to have above-average vocabulary](#) than those who read in printed books alone.

These two surveys indicate the ongoing [debate](#) concerning the overall role and [value of digital books](#) for [young children](#).

What do parents think?

Data from [Ofcom](#) suggest that 39% of three and four year-old children in the UK now use a tablet computer at home. There is evidence that most parents who use educational apps on these devices believe their children do learn from them.

A survey commissioned by Moms with Apps of 457 parents found that over 96% of parents [agree their children benefit from using apps](#), with many noting the educational and developmental benefits children derive from them. In another US survey, more than half (57%) of parents [said their child had learned "a lot"](#) about one or more subject areas (such as reading/vocabulary, maths, or cognitive skills) from educational media.

In Australia, a small [survey](#) of 80 parents revealed similar results. Parents of three to five year-olds whose children use iPads in childcare centres agreed that apps designed for pre-school educational purposes could be used to boost certain skills such as literacy, numeracy, science and art, but not physical education and social development.

Of course, surveys are [based on correlations which do not imply causation](#) and rarely examine alternative pathways and detailed information. To understand how print books can enrich the digital reading experience, we need to become more nuanced in the way we

think about this issue. How can the new features of interactive books complement learning from the printed page?

New digital options

Interactive digital books can provide an impetus for parents to interact with children in ways that have been shown to be mutually enjoyable and beneficial. The technology means that storybook apps offer a means to decrease the asymmetry of adults reading and children listening, instead providing opportunities for both parent and child to jointly discover fancy interactive features embedded in the app.

On a wider level, the global market for digital books offers the potential for a much easier production of international variants of the same book. Digital storybooks can more effectively connect remote communities and bring local stories to global audiences. With easy personalisation options embedded in many digital books, children can become book authors but also book heroes with a few taps. Parents can create stories together with their children, incorporating photos of family members or audio-recordings.

Personalisation can also provide an avenue of communication for families when they cannot read together – for example a parent away from home can record them reading their child's favourite story for them to listen to if they cannot be there to read it to them. Supporting innovative book authoring is one way to address the ongoing concern in children's book publishing about the lack of diversity of topics portrayed in children's storybooks.

In addition, augmented reality apps, which overlay digital elements onto real objects as viewed (through the device's camera) on the screen, could also catalyse a wave of innovation. Opportunities to interact with digital stories can be used to teach early digital literacy skills, enrich family

relationships and thus [entertain as well as educate](#) young children.

Imagination killers

There also could be some downsides to the new features. While in some instances augmented reality apps can enhance a story experience, in others they may take away the impetus for a child's [imagination](#). Personalised digital books can be both motivating and great fun – but too much personalisation may distract the child and will certainly not turn children into digital bookworms.

Similarly, while digital books with several interactive features can involve and empower children, too many bells and whistles may simply overwhelm them. Not many app designers have quite struck the right balance on this yet, and there are [still](#) a large amount of noisy apps on the market.

We need to understand what the learning opportunities of digital books might be for young [children](#). Surveys can help us understand people's attitudes and beliefs, but they can't provide us with a full understanding of the benefits and limitations of digital books. To know what the ups and downs of digital books really are, plenty of research is still to be done.

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