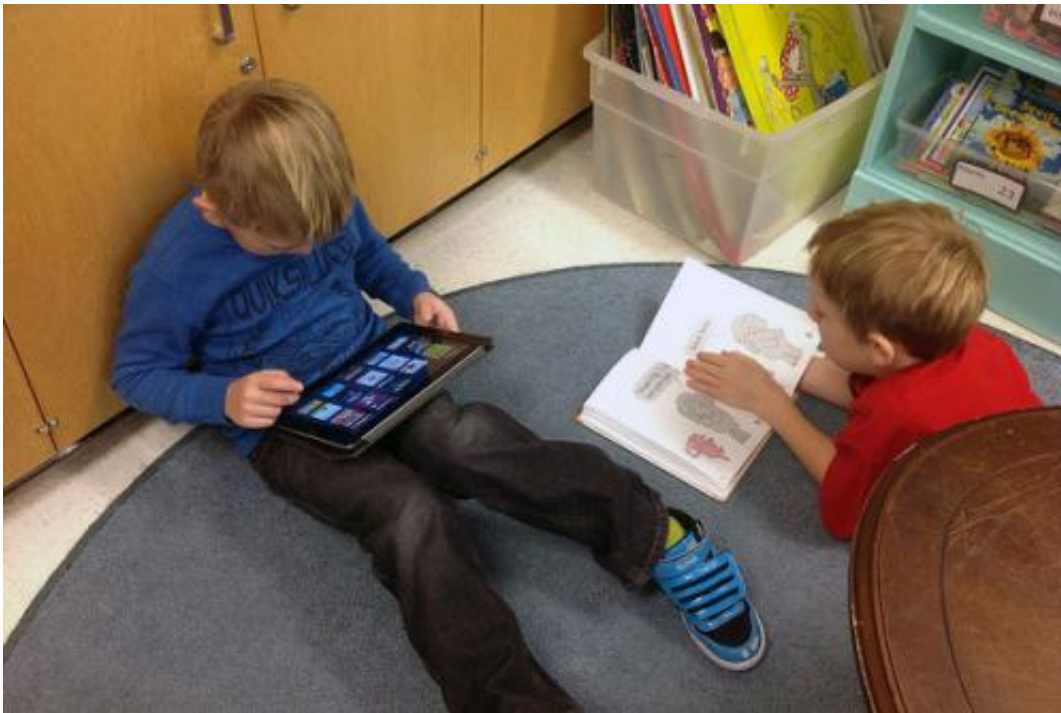


Using digital devices to encourage reading with kids, meditation and more

February 19 2015, by Blake Eligh



Credit: Kathy Cassidy via Flickr

We use technology to run everything from our home thermostats to our social lives, but can it also make us better parents? A pair of new studies examines that very question, and preliminary findings are encouraging.

UTM economics and public policy professor Philip Oreopoulos studies behavioural economics, which incorporates psychology and sociology to

better understand how individuals make decisions. This research is often applied to economics to explain why, for instance, people have trouble saving money, however Oreopoulos is applying those same methods to education and child development with the help of an app or two.

"Through technology and behavioural economics, we can explore ways to encourage parents to practice more reading with their kids," he says.

At Chicago's Behavioral Insights and Parenting Lab, Oreopoulos is investigating the effects of technology on encouraging early literacy. The PACT Study (Parents And Children Together) tracks the reading habits of 500 families of preschoolers enrolled in Head Start programs in disadvantaged Chicago neighbourhoods. Parents receive iPads loaded with data-gathering apps, which they use to read interactive stories with their children. Parents also receive short reminders and supportive messages by text, and set weekly goals, which they share with a friend or partner to help with accountability.

"The right message can encourage parents to structure routines and discover a new way of doing things," Oreopoulos says. "We're finding clear evidence that these nudges lead to a greater increase in parents reading with their kids."

Oreopoulos likes the accessibility of the technology, and the simplicity of the program delivery. "It's a no-brainer," he says. "Smartphones are accessible electronic advisors."

Oreopoulos is also working on Pathways to Peaceful Parenting, a follow-up study to examine how a similar application of behavioural economics and [technology](#) might help to de-stress parents and improve [family life](#). Using a similar structure to the literacy study, parents will use meditation apps, as well as a wearable device to measure [heart rates](#), stress levels and other data.

Oreopoulos, who is the father of two children, aged four and six, uses the [Headspace](#) meditation app himself. "The more I do it, the more I get out of it," he says. He's curious to see what the data gathered from a larger study size might reveal and what the potential effects the practice might have on parenting and family life.

"It's been shown that meditation can lead to lower heart rates, better health and better management of feelings," he says. "We'll see if we can apply the same methods with [parents](#) who are dealing with preschoolers."

The study is still in the preliminary stages and is to launch in late spring.

Provided by University of Toronto

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