

Literacy app improves school readiness in at-risk preschoolers

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Using mobile apps in preschool classrooms may help improve early literacy skills and boost school readiness for low-income children, according to research by NYU's Steinhardt School of Culture, Education, and Human Development.

"Guided use of an educational [app](#) may be a source of motivation and engagement for children in their early years," said Susan B. Neuman, professor of childhood and literacy education at NYU Steinhardt and the study's author. "The purpose of our study was to examine if a motivating app could accelerate children's learning, which it did."

Neuman presents her findings on April 19 with co-author Carolyn Strom at the American Education Research Association's annual meeting in Chicago.

The average time young children spend using electronic devices has more than tripled in the last five years. Nevertheless, there remains a disparity in access to mobile devices and other technology for low-income children. In a recent study, 49 percent of middle class children reported downloading an app, 80 percent of which were educational, while only 30 percent of low-income children downloaded an app, 57 percent of which were educational.

This "app gap" was the focus of Neuman and Strom's study. Recognizing that the preschool years are formative in developing children's use of media, the researchers designed a study to examine the effectiveness of

an educational app called Learn with Homer on low-income preschoolers' school readiness skills. The Apple iPad app engages children in a systematic program that integrates word sounds and storybook reading.

The study was conducted in 10 Head Start classrooms with a total of 148 preschoolers. Children were randomly selected to use either Learn with Homer or an art and activity app. The preschoolers engaged with the apps for 10 to 12 minutes daily, guided by moderators during the 10-week study.

Using several tests of early literacy, the researchers measured changes in [children's](#) phonological awareness as a result of daily uses of Learn with Homer, compared with the control group using the other app. Phonological awareness is the ability to detect sounds that make up words, and is an important predictor of later reading ability.

The researchers found measurable growth in phonological awareness and understanding the connections between speech and printed letters for the group using the Learn with Homer app, compared with the group using the art and activity app. They also observed significant differences in print concepts.

"Given the importance of phonological awareness and how it contributes to [school readiness](#), using digital resources in a highly controlled setting, like a classroom, may substantially help to close the 'app gap,'" said Neuman.

Provided by New York University

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