

Kiddie tablets 'grow up' as competition grows

December 24 2015, byBree Fowler



Four kids' tablets are displayed, Monday, Dec. 21, 2015, in New York. Clockwise, from upper left, are LeapFrog's Epic, a Nabi Elev-8, Kurio's Xtreme 2, and an Amazon Fire Kids Edition. As competition has increased, kids' tablets have come a long way from bad graphics, slow processors, chunky exteriors and child-like operating systems. Today's products feature high-definition screens, speedier operations, fashionably slim bodies and Android-based operating systems, or in one case, Windows 10. (AP Photo/Kathy Willens)

Kiddie tablets have grown up.

Tablets designed just for [kids](#) are getting more sophisticated as they face increased competition from regular tablets. The new products also have better screens, speedier chips and fashionably slim bodies. They let older children do more, yet hold their hands until they're ready for unsupervised access.

Although many of the tablets were originally conceived as educational toys for kids as old as middle schoolers, they've been more popular with younger children. Older kids have been apt to reject them in favor of their [parents' tablet](#) or smartphone.

That shift has prompted companies to focus more on preschoolers and kindergarteners, as they create super-durable products that can withstand repeated abuse and develop games and apps that teach reading and math.

But now, some of those companies are looking to take back some of the sales to older kids that they've lost over the years, offering premium products—most with price tags of over \$100—that look and perform less like toys and more like the ones adults use.

LeapFrog, maker of the toy-like LeapPad, released its first Android tablet this year. And Kurio is branching out to Windows 10 and includes a full version of Microsoft Office in a new tablet-laptop combination.

The use of Android and Windows software, in place of the more basic, custom-made systems used in toy tablets, allows for more sophisticated apps and games and a range of content from standard app stores.

Monica Brown, LeapFrog's vice president for product marketing, said the company aimed to "create something that was kind of sleek and more tech forward for kids who were looking for something that felt like their parents' tablet."

But parents still want educational content and safety features that come with a tablet designed purely for kids. LeapFrog's Epic, along with the other new tablets for kids, are attempts to bridge that gap.



LeapFrog's Android-based Epic kids tablet is shown Monday, Dec. 21, 2015, in New York. As competition has increased, kids' tablets have come a long way from bad graphics, slow processors, chunky exteriors and child-like operating systems. The Epic has a sleek design, but the bright green bumper is removable. It's much faster than a LeapPad and can run Android-based content, but in-app purchases and inappropriate ads are blocked. (AP Photo/Kathy Willens)

The Epic looks like a regular Android tablet, but comes with a removable bright-green bumper. It is much faster than a LeapPad and can run versions of popular Android games such as "Fruit Ninja" and "Doodle Jump." There's access to the Internet, but it's limited to about

10,000 kid-safe websites (though parents can add others). Parents can also limit and track how much time a child spends watching videos, playing games or reading.

Lynn Schofield Clark, a professor of media studies at the University of Denver, said kids tablets are a tough sell these days.

"Kids are always aspirational in their ages, and they're always interested in what older kids are doing," Clark said, pointing to the fascination that many preteens have with smartphones as a prime example.

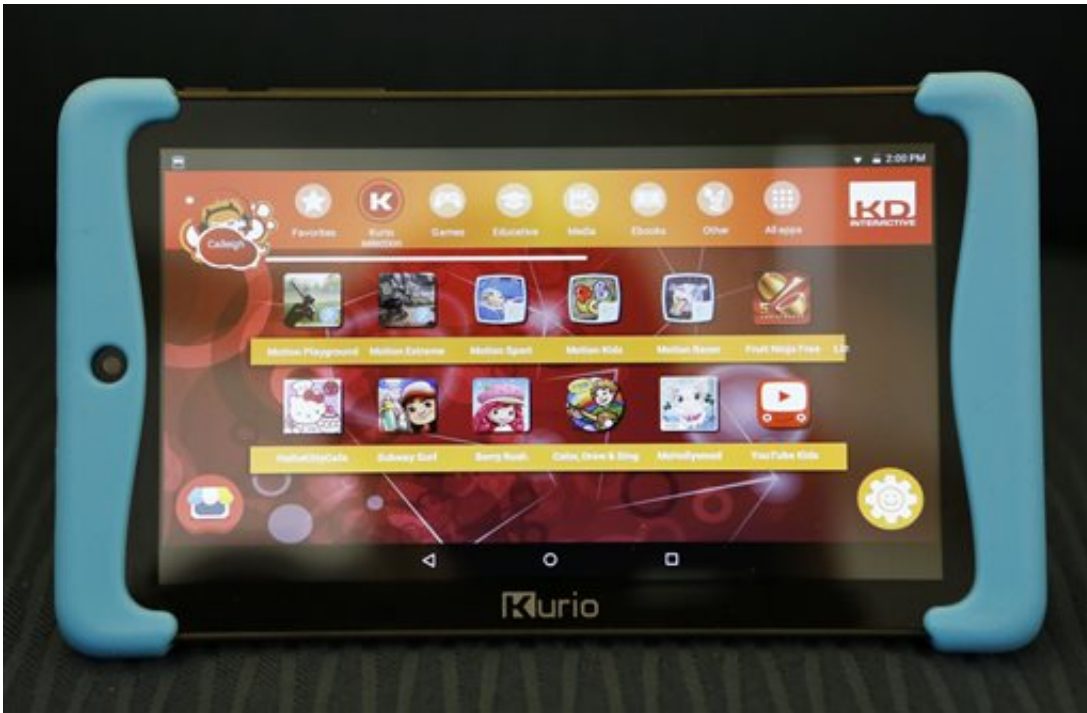
Meanwhile, most parents won't spend money on kids-only gadgets unless they believe they offer significant educational benefits.

"If they're just looking for something to entertain their kid, then why wouldn't they just hand over their smartphone?" she asked.

Kurio aims to answer that question with the Smart, a device that let kids do things they previously might have needed their parents' laptop for, such as typing up and saving their homework online or playing video on their TV through an HDMI cable. The Smart is a Windows 10 laptop with a detachable screen and comes with a free year of Microsoft Office.

Eric Levin, Kurio's strategic director, said kids using children's tablets are getting younger, as older kids gravitate toward adult products. Four years ago, he said, most Kurio users ranged from ages 6 to 12. Now, half of them are 3 to 5.

Although older kids may be ready for adult tablets, the shift has left those 8 to 12 without age-appropriate devices, Levin says. The Smart tries to fix that.



Kurio's latest Android-based Xtreme 2 kids tablet is displayed, Monday, Dec. 21, 2015, in New York. As competition has increased, bad graphics, slow processors, chunky exteriors and child-like operating systems have fallen by the wayside. Today's products feature high-definition screens, speedier operations, fashionably slim bodies and Android-based operating systems, or in one case, Windows 10. The Xtreme 2 comes with more than 60 preloaded games and apps. (AP Photo/Kathy Willens)

Other makers of kids tablets have also gone high-end this year. Fuhu bills the Nabi Elev-8 as a premium, 8-inch tablet. But the company ran into financial problems early in the holiday season, and its products have been tough to find.

Nonetheless, adult tablets remain popular with kids.

Amazon touts its Fire tablet as something the entire family can use,

eliminating the need to buy something just for the kids.

"While I appreciate that might have led other companies to adjust their products, we're upping our game based on what customers want in the best kid experience," said Aaron Bromberg, senior manager of product management for Amazon Devices.



Fuhu's Nabi Elev-8 slim kids tablet is displayed with a protective red bumper, Monday, Dec. 21, 2015, in New York. Fuhu ran into financial and inventory problems early in the holiday season and recently filed for Chapter 11 bankruptcy protection, announcing plans to sell its tablet business to toy maker Mattel. Although customers who previously placed orders for tablets with the company have had trouble getting them, Fuhu has promised to ship those orders in time for Christmas. (AP Photo/Kathy Willens)

The tablet's FreeTime app lets parents set up profiles for each kid, with access to only the content they approve. It also lets parents limit the amount of time spent on different kinds of content such as videos or apps. For an additional fee, Amazon's FreeTime Unlimited service offers more than 10,000 books, apps, games and videos geared toward kids ages 3 to 10.

Nonetheless, Amazon is selling a kids' edition tablet for \$100. It's essentially Amazon's bare-bones \$50 Fire tablet packaged with a colorful protective bumper and a year's subscription to FreeTime Unlimited.

It also comes with a two-year guarantee: If your kid breaks it, Amazon will replace it.



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This undated photo provided by VTECH, shows an InnoTab MAX. VTech is the kid's technology maker that was hacked, exposing the personal information of over 6 million children. That said, this is a pretty decent product, particularly for younger children. (VTECH via AP)

A look at some of the newest kids' tablets on the market

Want to get your child a tablet computer? Here's a look at some models

designed for kids.

All of them feature parental controls and can toggle back and forth between kid and adult modes, so parents can use them to check their email or post on Twitter after their little ones go to bed.



This photo provided by KD Interactive shows the Kurio Smart. Geared toward older kids, this is something that they can type book reports on or do online research for a school project. It's the first kids tablet to run on Windows 10 and its purchase includes a free year of Microsoft Office, along with some OneDrive storage. Parents have the option of filtering the Internet and setting usage time limits. The device comes with a slew of preloaded games and apps, including the same motion games on the Xtreme 2. An added bonus: the keyboard is included and acts as a hard, protective case when the device is closed. (KD Interactive via AP)

LEAPFROG EPIC (\$140)

This is LeapFrog's first Android tablet. Like its toy-like predecessor, the LeapPad, this tablet has an educational focus. Content is based on a child's age. Various apps communicate with each other as they track a child's progress, helping to create a more customized experience. Each day, kids are presented with a new vocabulary word when they sign on. A connected stylus, familiar to LeapPad users, helps with writing practice. Web surfing is limited to a 10,000 kid-safe sites.

Online: www.leapfrog.com/en-us/products/leapfrog-epic

KURIO XTREME 2 (\$130)

Similar to the Epic, the Extreme 2 has a sharp screen, fast processor and a decent amount of storage. It comes with games and apps, including a handful of motion games that are controlled by your child's movements as they pretend to do things like ski or swim. Kids can access the Internet, which can be filtered as much or as little as their parent desires.

Online: www.kurioworld.com/k/us/parents/products/tab/



An Amazon Fire kids' edition tablet is displayed, Monday, Dec. 21, 2015, in New York. This \$100 tablet bundles a \$50 Kindle Fire with a colorful protective bumper, a year of FreeTime Unlimited and a two-year guarantee that if the tablet breaks the company will replace it for free. (AP Photo/Kathy Willens)

KURIO SMART (\$200)

Geared toward older kids, this is something that they can type book reports on or do online research for a school project. It is the first kids tablet to run on Windows 10 and includes a free year of Microsoft Office. Parents can filter the Internet and set time limits on use. The device comes with a slew of games and apps, including the same motion games on the Xtreme 2. The device is a laptop whose keyboard detaches to become a tablet. When closed, the keyboard acts as a hard, protective case.

Online: www.kurioworld.com/k/us/parents/products/smart/

AMAZON FIRE KIDS EDITION (\$100)

This is Amazon's bare-bones \$50 Fire tablet packaged with a colorful protective bumper (pink or blue), a year's subscription to kids' content through Amazon's FreeTime Unlimited and free replacements for two years if the tablet breaks. FreeTime Unlimited, which normally starts at \$3 per month, is what really shines. Kids have unlimited access to 10,000 kid-friendly books, videos and games. Ads and in-app purchases are disabled.

Online: www.amazon.com/Fire-Edition-Direct-Proof/dp/B00YYZEQ1G

VTECH INNOTAB MAX (\$100)

Yes, VTech is the company that got hacked in November, exposing personal information on more than 6 million children. Nonetheless, the Innotab Max is a decent product, particularly for younger children. The tablet folds to close, creating a hard, protective case with a handle for on-the-go use. Little kids may like this, but older children will likely be turned off by the look. Because this tablet uses Google's Android, it has access to a variety of content made for that system. But it also features content designed by VTech. However, VTech's app store remains shut because of the data breach.

Online: www.vtechkids.com/brands/brand_view/innotab_max

FUHU NABI ELEV-8 (\$170)

Its sharp screen and fast processor give it the look and feel of a premium product. And while it comes with a hefty amount of built-in games and apps, kids can get more through Nabi Pass, a \$5-per-month subscription service similar to FreeTime Unlimited. But the company has run into financial problems, so its Elev-8 tablets have been tough to find.

Online: www.nabitablet.com/elev-8

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