

#Technology:

Where can it take you?

Mobile technology is now part of everyday life, so should it be part of your daily work too? **Mel Parks** hears from three childcare providers with very different takes on technology. ▶



With “hashtag” named as children’s word of the year 2015 by Oxford University Press, there is no escaping the hold that technology has on children’s lives, and ours too, as social media conversations replace talking over the garden fence. Mobile technology promises so much for childcare professionals: speedy paperwork, training courses at home, learning and play for children.

Laura Henry, well-known early years expert and host of weekly discussion on Twitter, #EYTalking, believes in the importance of social media for childcare businesses. “Social media, and Facebook in particular, can be a brilliant way to share positive stories of your setting, engage with parents, and keep up to date with childcare news,” says Laura.

Facebook can’t take the place of regular face-to-face interaction, but it can be handy to reach certain groups of parents, for example, working parents, or those that find it difficult to chat at busy drop-off and pick-up times. It is important to stay professional at all times on social media, particularly in groups and forums.

Reduce paperwork

Technology can also help with the day-to-day running of your business. With apps and software for accounts, paperwork and learning journeys, there are many possibilities, all promising to save you time, offer consistency and convenience and improve communications with parents.

If you are confident with a pen and paper and you have a smooth-running system, then there’s no reason to change. But if you feel it’s time to change the way you run your business, then it might be worth researching an app or software that can ease the process.

Three approaches to technology

Figuring out the level of access that children in your setting have to computers and mobile devices is another decision that is as individual as you are. Three childcare providers talked to us about their differing attitudes to technology.

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1. Part of play from the beginning

Snapdragons Nurseries in Wiltshire invested in a couple of iPads for each of their nurseries for use by the children. “They are growing up with mobile technology, and embracing it as part of life and learning alongside more traditional tools will help them thrive in the modern world,” says Mary Llewellyn, Business Development Manager.

iPads for play and work

Snapdragons’ children have limited and controlled access to iPads as part of a traditional range of activities. “We see iPads as part of children’s learning process just as much as making marks with sticks in mud,” explains Mary.

Staff appreciate the mobile and versatile nature of iPads compared to desk-bound computers, as the children can take them where they feel comfortable. They can photograph work, curl up with a story, or go to the opposite ends of the room to their friend where they can video call each other.

2. Leave it for later

When meeting the EYFS requirements for technology, Montessori settings take a wider view of the term, which is not confined to computers and mobile devices.

At Little Oaks Montessori Nursery School in East Sussex, Directress Angela Austin (a role parallel to class teacher) says:



Snapdragons
children took
photos of different
shaped leaves
using an iPad

Children and technology



92%
of children aged 3
to 5 have access
to touchscreen
technology at home *



28%
of children aged 3 to 5
look at or read stories
on a touchscreen at
least once in a
typical week *



41%
of early years
practitioners say
children have access
to a touchscreen in
their setting *



11%
of 3 to 4 year olds had
their own tablet in
2014. This has nearly
quadrupled in a year
– it was 3% in 2013 †



1 IN 3
5 to 15 year olds has
their own tablet. This
has nearly doubled in a
year – from 19% in 2013
to 34% in 2014 †



6 IN 10
(62%) children aged
5 to 15 use a tablet at
home, which has
risen by half in a year
(42% in 2013) †

“Montessori is all about using real things that work, whether that is a screwdriver with nuts and bolts, keys with locks, a blender, toaster or torch.”

Exploring how things work

Children explore physical items and the way they work. For a 2-year-old, technology would be about lifting flaps, pushing buttons and posting things. They also have a CD player, which children can operate and listen to with headphones.

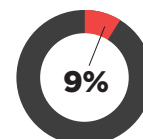
Angela acknowledges that computers can enhance learning by looking up information or pictures on the internet if children are particularly interested in a topic, but believes it's not necessary for under 5s. “It's about introducing electronic technology slowly and gradually, when the child is ready and happens alongside exploring the concrete world,” she explains.



TWICE AS MANY
children aged 5 to 15
are using a tablet to
go online – in 2013, it
was 23% and in 2014,
it was 42% †



68%
Tablets are now
being used in 68% of
primary schools ‡



9%
There is an individual
tablet for each pupil
in 9% of schools,
primary and
secondary ‡

3. Focus on the physical

Steiner early years settings are exempt from parts of the EYFS that don't fit with their educational approach, and one of those exemptions is technology. They believe sensory nourishment is important to children, and feel that screen-based technology doesn't offer that.

Michael Hall Steiner Kindergarten offers care for children between 3 and 6 years. One example of their interpretation of technology is using mechanical tools as part of a food production process. The children will help grind grains to make flour, which they then turn into bread. Or they will mash and squash apples in a press, and drink the juice.

“It's hard work and it takes time,” explains Kindergarten Teacher, Mark Fielding, “but young children experience time at a different pace to us.”

Enjoyment of the real world

Mark's fellow teacher Saskia Harding mentions that in their play the children turn objects into iPads and mobile phones. “A silver tray is the kindergarten iPad and blocks from tree branches make excellent mobile phones – we don't need the real thing!” Spending time outside is part of the Steiner ethos, and the Michael Hall Kindergarten has a large garden and woodlands near the Ashdown Forest in East Sussex, where children can experience the natural world.



- > Cameras are not used in the setting to record observations of children. Staff prefer to be fully present with the child, and write notes on a computer later.

Taking control of technology

With these examples of very different approaches to childcare and technology, it is clear that the way you navigate through the options is your decision. And to help you make the best use of mobile technology, it helps to have a clear direction and policy on use and safety.

Prioritise children's safety

Claire Lilley, Head of Child Safety Online at the NSPCC, says: "You need to be informed so that you can keep children safe and help them get the most out of their online experience."

She recommends that you set up parental controls on all your devices and websites you allow the children to use regularly. This is important to think about if you are a childminder and share devices with your family.

"Making time to listen and talk to the children in your care about what they are doing online is vital," says Claire. "Make them understand that they need to know who they are talking to and



Child at Montessori setting using headphones

what information they are sharing. Let them know that if someone upsets them, they need to tell an adult about it."

There are many benefits to using technology to market and run your business and it can be helpful to enhance the children's learning. But there are times when it is less helpful, and it's up to you to evaluate this and navigate your own path. Take one thing at a time, prioritising the safety of the children in your care. **CP**

Technology policy checklist

It's good practice to write a policy on technology for your setting, as it will help you think about all the issues involved and make sure that parents, children and any staff, assistants or childcare professionals you work with are clear on what you expect. Involve them when you're deciding what should go in the policy. Some of these issues become more relevant as children get older, but it's worth thinking things through in advance.

For children

- **Ground rules:** if you work with older children, involve them in deciding when they can use devices and what for.
- **Use of social media:** can they take pictures of friends while they are with you and post on social media?
- **Bring your own:** are children allowed to bring their own devices to your setting, for example, mobile phones or hand-held gaming devices with internet access?
- **Supervision:** how will you make sure that children's

use of technology is supervised effectively, especially access to the internet?

- **Games and apps:** how do you decide which games and apps to download or buy for use by the children?

For you and other adults you work with

- **Parental controls:** how do you make sure that parental controls are activated on all the websites and devices you give children access to?
- **Safe and secure:** how do

you check that any software or apps you use to run your business are safe and secure with confidential information and pictures of the children?

- **Social media:** how do you make sure that you act professionally on social media? Will you add parents as friends on Facebook, for example? What about posting pictures of children?
- **Online safety:** how will you work with the children to make sure they stay safe online?

Resources

Log on to **MyPACEY** to access PACEY's Practice Guide, Supporting Children to Use Technology.

Internet Matters is an independent child-safety organisation offering advice and resources. For further information, visit **internetmatters.org**

The NSPCC's Net Aware tool is a great resource on children's social media use. Visit **net-aware.org.uk** for more.