



Frequently Asked Questions about *Tap, Click, Read: Growing Readers in a World of Screens*

by Lisa Guernsey and Michael H. Levine

What is *Tap, Click, Read* about?

This book maps out a modern approach to helping children learn, with a particular emphasis on learning to read. We avoid the tired nagging of “no screen time” and the overheated enthusiasm over apps as the holy grail of early education. Our aim is to ensure that all children, regardless of their parents’ income, will gain the skills of 21st century literacy that come from the combination of parents, educators, and high-quality media.

Why did you write this book?

We wrote the book because an alarming number of children in the United States never become good readers. More than two-thirds of American fourth graders are not reading at grade level or “proficiently,” according to the Nation’s Report card. For children in low-income families and children of color, the numbers are even worse: more than 80 percent are not hitting the proficient mark. Despite billions of dollars of interventions and new programs, that percentage has barely budged for more than two decades. That, to us, is a crisis.

What role should communities play to address the key early literacy and educational equity issues you raise?

Instead of simply focusing on whether kids have new tablets, communities need to take stock of whether children truly have literacy opportunities everywhere they go, and assess whether they are meeting the needs of their most underserved families. Is there a cohesive strategy to the way they use libraries, child care and early learning centers, public media stations, elementary schools, and afterschool programs—and the way technology is integrated in those programs? More than 75 percent of children live in homes with mobile technologies, but little attention gets paid to *how* they are using those devices and the ways in which parents, teachers, and librarians should be helping them use media to learn.

What about parents’ responsibility to monitor the amount of screen time that their children are exposed to? Are you suggesting that very young children should be plugged in more?

No, we do not advocate putting babies in front of screens by themselves. Infants and toddlers (and older kids) desperately need social interaction and meaningful conversation with their parents and caregivers. But when screens are used in joint engagement with parents—when they are used like picture books, as a jumping off point for conversation or even just exchanges of curious glances and laughter—they can become one of many tools for learning with our kids.

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How young is too young? Is there a health or developmental risk associated with screen time that concerned educators and parents should be aware of?

By following the Three C's, parents can make smarter choices about when to introduce digital media to their kids. This means: Be careful about the CONTENT (look for evidence that a TV show or app is designed for young children's *learning*), be aware of the importance of CONTEXT (ask questions and talk with your children, and recognize that children's daily routines should always include physical exercise, social engagement, and good sleep), and tune into the individual CHILD (is your child sensitive to certain noises or images? Is he unable to sleep after playing certain games right before bedtime? Does he break out into happy conversation whenever he sees videos of trains?) Many of the stories about risks from screen time are focusing on the risk of no social engagement or the risk of not giving children a healthy daily routine. Simply taking away a device or turning off the TV does not mean that children are safe from experiencing those risks. They are important issues whether there are screens in children's lives or not.

For more on the science behind the Three C's, see Lisa's 2012 book, *Screen Time*.

How do you propose solving the reading crisis you describe above?

We need to recognize the power of parents, educators, and media in combination with each other.

In the book, we sum this up in four key steps:

- invest in early childhood from birth through age 8,
- address the lack of broadband Internet and other 21st-century learning opportunities offered to families,
- scale up effective tech-assisted programs that activate educators and communities; and
- Recognize and build upon the assets (such as dual-language learning) and rich cultural knowledge inherent in the United States' diversity.

Our book also uses video and storytelling to demonstrate concrete examples of what parents, educators, and communities can do.

There's a chapter in the book called "Readialand." What is that all about?

You are probably wondering: What is Readialand? For starters, it is *not* a theme park you visit on vacation. Think of Readialand as a cohesive network of educators and families harnessing media to bring early learning and lifelong literacy to your neighborhood, your town, your city, your state. Readialand is an ecosystem where media is designed in service of reading and where reading and literacy are strengthened through the use of media.

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Readialand does *not* involve a future in which print is abandoned.. Instead, we argue for preparing children for a world that, like our current moment, is a rich mix of digital media and print media. No matter what technology may come, children will need to learn how to use a wide variety of communication tools for a wide variety of purposes, while becoming critical thinkers about the messages and ideas that they see all around them.

Let’s talk about apps. How do you know what apps your child should be using? Where can a parent or educator turn for trustworthy advice and counsel?

In the book, we called the app marketplace a “digital wild west” for good reason—right now, app makers and marketers aren’t providing research-based advice or guidance.. Our research shows that too often, apps are characterized by a lack of transparency about who made them, a paucity of child development or content knowledge among developers, overhyped or unsubstantiated claims about their efficacy, a lack of evidence they are designed for learning, and an incomplete or total absence of ability to respond to the real literacy needs of children, especially those who are struggling readers.

App store owners need to step up and help, but in addition we all need to get smarter about the apps that kids are using. Until app stores do step up, the book offers up the best of the resources that now exist: several curators and review websites that are designed to help. (You can see a list at www.tapclickread.org).

How should teachers be teaching more effectively? What tools are important to give our kids every advantage?

Here are three actions that educators can take (and more ideas are in the book too):

- *Adopt a tap-click-read mind-set* toward your students’ literacy learning: *Tap* into learning networks and tap open new media opportunities for them. *Click* into resources yourself while recognizing that the clicks of children are actions emanating from their own curiosities; help steer their desire for interactivity toward materials that help them learn. And hold dear the act of *reading* and the importance of helping your students become literate in multiple ways.
- *Remember the skills + knowledge approach*. For children in preschool and up, this could mean teaching letters and sounds to help them practice the “decoding” of written words *while also* immersing them in stories and back-and-forth dialogue about the multilayered worlds of science, art, history, literature, different cultures, and more.
- *Seek opportunities for joint engagement with media* (including print books, of course), either among children or with adults and children working and learning together.



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How can parents help their kids gain stronger literacy skills? What if I can't afford new computers or expensive apps?

Literacy is an expansive word—getting more so with every passing year. Someone who is not steeped in early literacy research might think that literacy means reading print. But even the traditional definition of literacy has always meant more than that: It means reading, writing, listening, and speaking. Children need help in becoming skillful at all four of those skills and they can use media tools of all kinds to do so. As children grow up in a world of information overload and constant messaging, they will also need to learn media literacy and critical literacy.

The most important thing is to spend time talking with, listening to, and interacting with your children; media can provide on-ramps to those critical conversations.

What do policy makers need to do to help our kids be competitive in the 21st century?

First, they need to get active on the four critical endeavors we outlined above: investing in early childhood, addressing a lack of broadband access, scaling high-quality tech-assisted programs in their communities, and building on the foundation of U.S. diversity to innovate. In the book we also describe actions that lawmakers or community leaders can take starting today, such as creating a place in every community where educators and media mentors help children to gain confidence in their literacy and interactive technology skills and where parents will feel welcome to learn some new skills too. Taking these steps will help lead our communities out of the Digital Wild West and into Readialand.