Technology and Digital Media in the Early Years: Thoughts on What We Know and Why It Matters
Chip Donohue, Dean of Distance Learning and Continuing Education & TEC Center Director, Erikson Institute
Fred Rogers Center Senior Fellow & Advisory Council Member

When the integration of technology and interactive media in early childhood programs is built upon solid developmental foundations, and early childhood professionals are aware of both the challenges and the opportunities, educators are positioned to improve program quality by intentionally leveraging the potential of technology and media for the benefit of every child.
NAEYC & Fred Rogers Center Joint Position Statement

We have to help give children tools, building blocks for active play. And the computer is one of those building blocks. No computer will ever take the place of wooden toys or building blocks. But that doesn’t mean they have to be mutually exclusive. Fred Rogers

The adults who work with and on behalf of young children today were not born into the digital age, but the children are growing up in a digital world with new tools that create new opportunities and – if they have digitally literate adult tour guides and media mentors.
Chip Donohue, Director of the TEC Center, Erikson Institute

The look and feel of these newer digital technologies differ significantly from traditional manipulatives. However, the purpose and distinguishing features of quality tools are still framed by pedagogical practice, underscored by an implicit theory of learning, and designed to be implemented with intentionality by thoughtful educators. While the tools may change, the importance of knowing how to use them in ways that support young children’s learning remains constant; the need for high-quality classrooms and learning experiences is unchanging.
Mark Bailey, Distinguished University Professor, Pacific University College of Education
Bonnie Blagojevic, Education Consultant, Morningtown Consulting

Fred Rogers wrote, “Where would any of us be without teachers – without people who have a passion for their art or their science or their craft and love it right in front of us?” Fred suggested that media had the potential to present children with enthusiastic teachers all the time. It is our responsibility to be the passionate teachers, or at least to bring teaching materials to life via media.
Alice Wilder, Educational Psychologist, Blue’s Clues, Super Why, Cha-Ching, Speakaboos, Amazon Original Programming

As much as we might be advocates for innovative tools and pedagogies, please remember that children need to color and draw, to run and jump, to play with blocks and balls, and lie on their backs and watch the clouds. They need to be allowed to embrace their childhood and they need teachers to be supportive of a wide range of appropriate developmental experiences. Make sure that your use of technology supports rather than supplants these essential activities. So play and learn along with your students using the full range of classroom materials that are available, and have fun in the process.
Mark Bailey, Distinguished University Professor, Pacific University College of Education
Bonnie Blagojevic, Education Consultant, Morningtown Consulting

Digital media can offer a platform and outlet for that creativity – a go-anywhere, use-anytime, bottomless block set or art box, a portable piano, a storytelling tool kit. Make no mistake – digital tools aren’t the same as the real thing – kids absolutely need the tactile experience of fresh clay, finger paints, dress-up play and musical instruments. They’re different, a new category of play and self-expression, and we’re still learning the contexts in which they’re best used.
David Kleeman, Senior Vice President, Insights Programs, and PlayVangelist, PlayCollective

I went into television because I hated it so, and I thought there was some way of using this fabulous instrument to be of nurture to those who would watch and listen. Fred Rogers
Developmentally appropriate practice would suggest that with technology, as with everything else, we need to let children know what they can do, not just what they aren’t allowed to do. If we want children to understand that digital media technologies can be used for artmaking, learning, and communication, as well as entertainment, we need to demonstrate those possibilities. And if we want them to think critically about the values that media convey, we need to show them how to ask and find answers to relevant questions. By making technology integration about inquiry rather than inoculation and skill acquisition rather than acquiescence to a sales pitch, media literacy education provides a pedagogical path to those ends.

Faith Rogow, Media Literacy Education Strategist, Insightsers Educational Consulting

With decades of research and scientific understanding of child development and more than 40 years of science and study of children’s television use, a research literature has been established around the intersections of child development and traditional media technology. However, with the introduction of new technologies devices and applications, questions about developmentally appropriate usage of technology arise frequently, especially when it comes to use with younger children…more research needs to be done on the impact of technology, especially newer technologies, on children’s learning and development, but there are ways in which educators can utilize what is known about more traditional media platforms to make smart media choices regarding new media devices.

Michael B. Robb, Director of Education and Research, Fred Rogers Center
Alexis Lauricella, Associate Director, Center on Media and Human Development, Northwestern University

When used well, digital media can enable access to information and stories, while also connecting schools, teachers, students, and families within neighborhoods, around the nation and around the world. Blogging, social networking, podcasting, instant messaging, posting to newsgroups or boards, and the Internet itself have brought new ways to connect, collaborate, and share, transforming the way we live and work…This culture simultaneously requires a host of new literacy skills and affords a dramatic re-envisioning of learning environments for both children and teachers. Even young children are able to not only access but also produce content that can be shared and reacted to by a community beyond the classroom. New technologies also offer possibilities for augmenting traditional approaches to instruction, as well as providing more assistance to parents. They can help us develop mixed models that blend in-school and informal, out-of-school learning.

Lisa Guernsey, Director, Early Education Initiative and Learning Technologies Project, New America
Michael Levine, Executive Director, Joan Ganz Cooney Center at Sesame Workshop

Computers can be useful machines, especially when they help people communicate in caring ways with each other… Fred Rogers

Perhaps it is the blending and balancing of interactive technology and interactions with others that offers the most promise for effective and appropriate uses of technology in the early years – closely connecting Fred Rogers’ approach with our emerging understanding of appropriate and intentional use of digital media to support early learning.

Chip Donohue, Director of the TEC Center, Erikson Institute

While I’m struggling along with everyone else to find ways that early childhood professionals can use technology appropriately, I try to keep in mind something else I learned from Fred: “No matter how helpful computers are as tools (and of course they can be very helpful tools), they don’t begin to compare in significance to the teacher-child relationship, which is human and mutual. A computer can help you learn to spell “HUG,” but it can never know the risk of the joy or actually giving or receiving one. I keep that in mind so I myself don’t get so fascinated by what the technology can do that I forget what it can’t do.”

Hedda Sharapan, Director of Early Childhood Initiatives, The Fred Rogers Company

...Let’s not get so fascinated by what the technology can do that we forget what it can’t do...It’s through relationships that we grow best and learn best. Fred Rogers

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