



## E-Book or Paper Book – What’s Best for Young Children?

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Technology surrounds us. It affects almost all aspects of our daily lives, including the types of books we read to young children. Nowadays, there are two types of books to read:

- Traditional paper books
- Electronic books (“e-books”), which can be viewed on a computer or via apps on tablets. A narrator reads the story, and children can enjoy interactive features such as animated pictures, music, sound effects, and links on the screen that connect to games or an elaboration of the pictures or story.

Concern has been raised about how much time children are spending in front of screens, and whether they learn as much from e-books as they do from traditional print books. There have been several studies about e-books over the past decade, and they have revealed both advantages and disadvantages to e-books.



### Advantages of E-books

- **Children learn early literacy skills from *good quality* e-books** that include features that promote children’s language and literacy skills, like:

- a dictionary
- words that are highlighted when the narrator reads them
- games and pictures that help explain the story [1,2].

Unfortunately, many commercially available e-books are not good quality and do not include these helpful features [3].

- **Children interact longer with their parents while looking at e-books** compared to traditional paper books [4, 5]
- **Children with developmental delays may benefit from e-books** – One study showed that, after sharing an e-book, children with developmental delays experienced improvement in their vocabulary, as well as in their understanding about how words can be broken up into smaller parts (i.e. syllables)[2].
- **Children can read e-books over and over again** – Repeated reading of the same story improves children’s literacy skills [6].
- **Children can enjoy e-books independently** – This may encourage children to pick up a book more often than they otherwise would [6].
- **E-books are convenient and accessible** – They can be downloaded on computers or transferred to hand held devices [6].
- **Children learn most from e-books when adults share the e-book with them and talk about the story** – Children learn less when they look at e-books by themselves [1, 4].

## Disadvantages of E-books

- **Parents don’t use as many helpful reading strategies while sharing e-books (compared to paper books)** – Studies show that parents don’t talk as much about the story and how it relates to their child’s life when sharing e-books. Instead, they have more conversations about the buttons and games in the e-book. Young children benefit when adults have discussions with them that go beyond the pages of the book, linking aspects of the story to their personal experiences, and providing explanations when necessary. Parents use more of these types of reading strategies with paper books [5,7].
- **Children learn less about the story from e-books** – One study showed that while children learned some information about the story from an e-book, children who read a paper book knew more details from the story as well as the order of events [5].
- **The interactive features in e-books might be distracting** – Some research has shown that the games and interactive links and buttons in many e-books distract children’s attention away from the story [8].

Whether children communicate more or less while looking at e-books is still under debate. Some research has shown that children communicate more while looking at e-books [7], but other research has shown that children communicate less [4].

But what most researchers agree upon is that e-books should not be used as a replacement for shared reading with traditional paper books [6]. Rather, sharing a good quality e-book with a child that has helpful interactive features can be used *in addition to traditional paper books*.

## How to Choose a Good Quality E-book

Studies have shown that the following e-book features help children learn:

- **The pictures and interactive “hotspots” should help children understand the story** – When music or animations add extra information that is not related to the story, it can interfere with children’s ability to understand the story [9, 10].
- **Games and interactive features should only be active after the narrator has finished reading the page** – While hotspots attract children’s attention, they interrupt the story if they can be activated while the narrator is reading [9, 5]. Many e-books now offer different modes (e.g. read-only versus read and play). Having a child listen to the story first in “read-only” mode will help him or her understand the story [11].
- **The words are highlighted as the narrator reads them** – This helps children understand the connection between the printed words and the what the narrator is saying [1].
- **Dictionary mode** – A dictionary or links on the page that explain challenging words can help build children’s vocabulary [9].
- **“Forward” and “backward” buttons** – These help a child learn about turning the pages in a book, and how we read from left to right [2].
- **Repeated reading options** – This function allows children to repeat pages, sentences, or specific words, which helps build children’s understanding [2].

## It Takes Two to Read an E-book

While children may enjoy an e-book without needing an adult to read the story, studies have shown that children learn most when they share the e-book with an adult [1, 4].

Here are some tips for enjoying e-books with young children:

- **Enjoy the book in “read-only” mode first** – Limiting the games and interactive features of the e-book during the child’s first reading will help the child understand the story [11].
- **Talk about the story** – Follow your child’s lead and have discussions about whatever interests him or her about the story.
- **Go *beyond* the story** – It will deepen your child’s understanding if you connect events in the story to things that have happened in your child’s life. For example, when reading about how Little Red Riding Hood brought cookies to her grandmother when she was sick, you could talk about how you visited your child’s grandmother when she was sick. Going beyond the story also involves talking about why things happen in the story, and what might happen later in the story. You can have conversations like this by using questions and comments that start with “I wonder what would happen if...” or “I’m thinking that he wants to...” [12].
- **Describe and explain** – If there are new or challenging words in the story, explain what the words mean for your child. For tips about how to help your child understand new words, please see our article “[Shoot for the SSTaRS](#)”. If the e-book has a dictionary function, use it to help describe what new words mean. Use the pictures and animations in the e-book to help explain new words.

Reading a good quality e-book can be a motivating activity for your child. But the most important thing to remember is to spend time sharing the e-book *together* with your child, and have conversations about the story. This will promote your child’s language and literacy skills.

### **Get more tips!**

For more fun tips on using e-Books and other technology interactively to build language and literacy skills, take a look at our [2015 Preschool Language and Literacy Calendar](#).

*The Hanen Centre is a Canadian not-for-profit charitable organization with a global reach. Its mission is to provide parents, caregivers, early childhood educators and speech-language pathologists with the knowledge and training they need to help young children develop the best possible language, social and literacy skills. This includes children who have or are at risk for language delays, those with developmental challenges such as autism, and those who are developing typically.*

*For more information, visit [www.hanen.org](http://www.hanen.org)*

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