

Routes to reading and writing

Dr Mitzi Waltz on resources that parents and teachers have found helpful for teaching the core skills of being able to read and write

For children who are non-verbal or minimally verbal, a tablet computer can be a great tool in helping them to read.

One of the best arguments for investing in one of these sophisticated touch-screen devices is that full-featured Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC) programs are now available for them.

Programs such as Proloquo2Go are more than simple communication tools (although that is a crucial use for them): their visual displays put the written word alongside its visual representation and its sound. As with picture books, that's the best way to help someone understand the basic concept of reading.

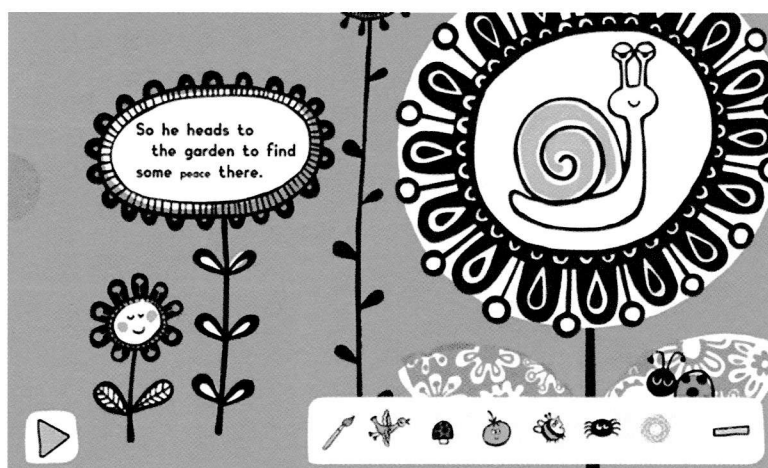
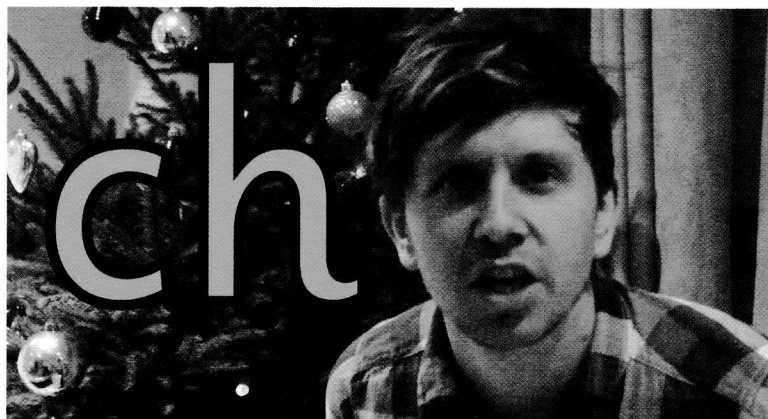
You can use any AAC system as a way to teach and reinforce reading skills.

A computer or tablet – whether it's an all-purpose tablet such as an iPad or a dedicated reading device such as a Kindle – can also open up new options for emerging readers.

Crack that code

Even the simplest e-book packages can usually read text aloud and allow readers to look up words and mark text they don't understand or want to save for later. It helps to work alongside the child and get them to point out how the words they see on the screen are made up of discrete phonemes (distinct units of sound) represented by letters. Once they crack that code they have the potential to soar. Incidentally, there's a free Kindle app that can be used on other tablets, computers and smartphones: see Resources, page 15.

Software programs specially designed to build reading and



writing skills through drills cleverly disguised as games are now widely available for tablets and smartphones, as well as computers. The advantage of these educational games is that they provide instant rewards (animations, sounds or points) that can motivate children to keep going.

Here, we highlight a few recent possibilities that have garnered good reviews from parents and teachers.

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Three different styles: screen shots from Mr Thorne Does Phonics (top), Phonics Silly Sentences (above right) and Noisy Neighbours by Ruth Green (above)

PocketPhonics by Apps in My Pocket



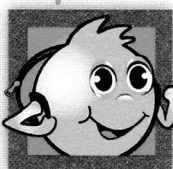
This app helps children learn the sounds for each letter, plus some letter combinations, rewarded with graphics and sounds (make sure this is actually a 'reward' for your child).

Phonics Silly Sentences by Abitalk

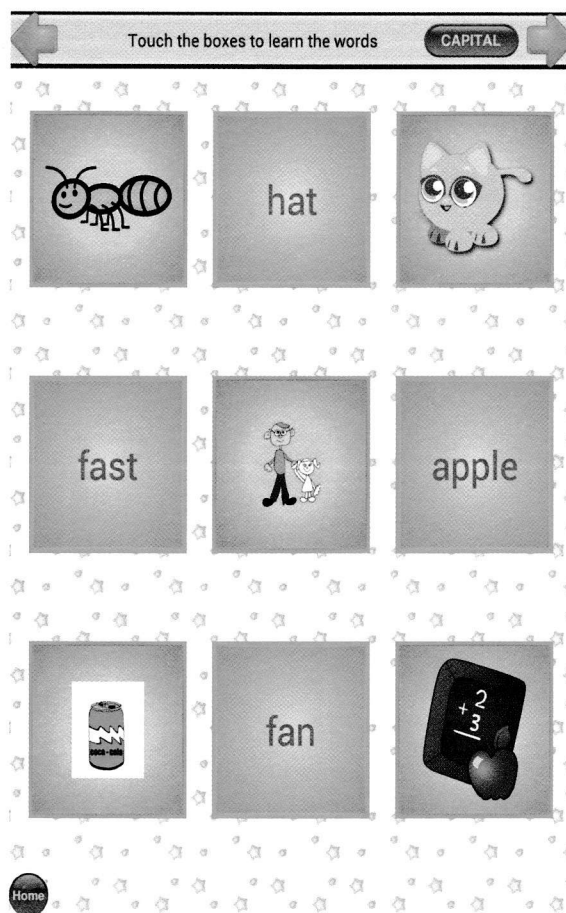


Using game-style formats, this app helps learners work on telling sounds apart and decoding words, phrases and sentences.

Kidspiration by Inspiration Software

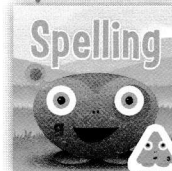


This visual-based software for Key Stage 1-3 learners helps children to improve their



vocabulary, word recognition, reading comprehension and writing skills.

Squeebles by Tiny Spark Ideas



This series of apps includes very snappy Spelling Test and Phonics options, which have downloadable primary-level Key Stage content. You can also add your own content (for example, the spelling words that came home with your child this week...)

Mr Thorne Does Phonics by Mr Thorne



Made by a British teacher, this flash-card-style, video-based app explains key phonics concepts. There are themed variations (such as safari, and myths and legends).



Writing Challenge by Literautus



Children get creative prompts for building characters and stories, and for using new words in their writing, with this fun app.

Strip Designer by Vivid

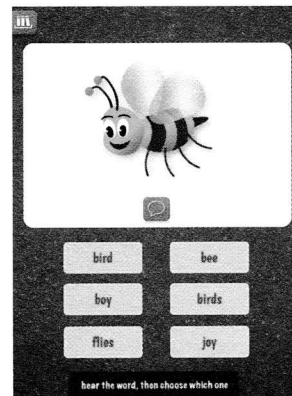
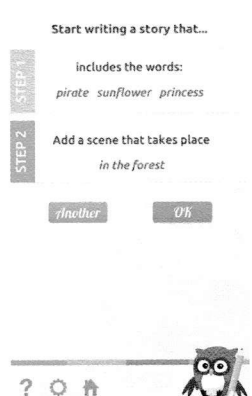


This app features comic book templates and elements, and encourages children to draw and add text to their own graphic-novel-style stories.

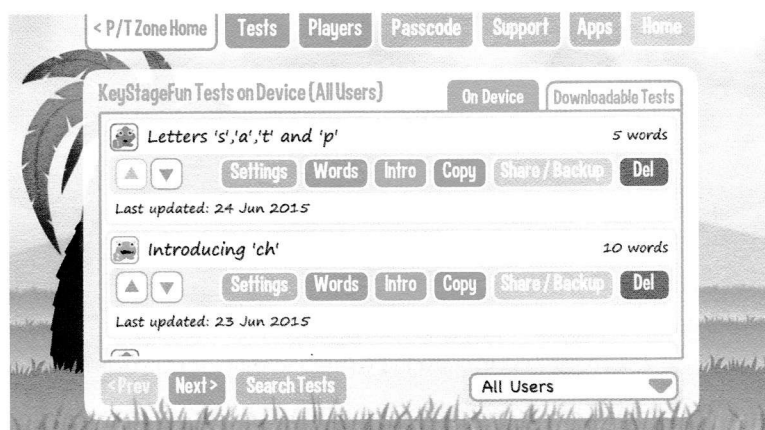
Noisy Neighbours by Ruth Green, Tate Gallery Read & Play



Children using this app are encouraged to write by making up characters and putting them into their own stories.



Ways with words:
screen shots from
Strip Designer (far
left), Pocket
Phonics (left) and
Squeebles Spelling
Test (below)



Stay safe

Some learners on the autism spectrum struggle with computers, especially when they are confronted with rapidly scrolling text or flashing icons.

If your child isn't enjoying the experience from the start, have a look at the possibility of changing settings to calm down the screen, limit or slow the way information is presented, or change the text and background colours. If nothing works, respect the fact that this

“The advantage of educational games is that they provide instant rewards that can motivate children to keep going”

device or programme isn't the right one for them.

Also, be sure to check out ways of protecting any electronic devices you use. Heavy-duty cases (see Resources) can make pricey tablets almost drop-proof.

Keep an eye on any app that allows children to purchase extra content. I recommend disabling such features except when you want to use them yourself.

If you check Google Play or Apple's App Store (see Resources) you will discover a wealth of tablet and smartphone apps besides the ones highlighted here. Many of them can also be purchased from Amazon.



Resources

- Apple special education apps selection: <https://www.apple.com/uk/education/special-education/ios/>
- Google Play (Android) special education apps selection: <https://play.google.com/store/search?q=special%20education&c=apps&hl=en>
- Kindle app: https://www.amazon.com/gp/digital/fiona/kcp-landing-page?ie=UTF8&ref_=kcp_pc_mkt_ind
- PrAACtical AAC: Supports for Language Learning: <http://practicalaac.org>. There are some excellent concepts and resources on show via this speech-therapist-run site, which focuses on how

to carry out literacy-building activities with people who use alternative and augmentative communication strategies (such as PECS) or devices.

- Proloquo2Go <http://www.assistiveware.com/product/proloquo2go>
- Protective cases for iPad, iPad Mini and Android devices: <http://www.autismpluggedin.com/cases>. After you've had a look at the cases, why not explore the rest of the site for more high-tech ideas, including some free downloads.
- Mr Thorne: <http://www.mrthorne.com>. Check out the full range of free resources available from this app-maker.