

Do you wonder about young children's use of technology?

You may have been wondering about the use of technology such as televisions, Ipads or interactive whiteboards in your setting. You may wonder what your parents expect or want for their children when it comes to technology and early childhood care and education. You may wonder if it is appropriate, or even beneficial, to use technology with young children or how to go about introducing and using technology as part of your curriculum and activities with children. Or you may constantly feel that overuse of technology at home is making your job of supporting children's care and learning ever more difficult.

Children of all ages are increasingly exposed to and becoming adept at using a variety of different technology and media, with 81% of Irish children now online. Very little, however, is known about very young children's use of and engagement with technology and media. Yet with the prevalence of older children's use of technology it is important to understand how ICT and media influence younger children's everyday lives, development and education. In Early Childhood Ireland we have carried out research on children's use of technology in their homes and in early childhood care and education settings. To this end we invited educators and parents of young children to fill in a survey on children's technology use. This is what we learned.

Let them play....

When it comes to raising their young children parents show a very clear pattern in their priorities, giving full priority to communication skills, behavior, literacy and math skills but very little priority to the use of media and technology (and spirituality). Parents worry about their children being overexposed to screen time and gadgets, how it might influence their children's health and social interactions. While many parents see the educational benefits of technology the large majority think that young children should learn through play, not technology, and that technology should only ever be used for very specific activities in early childhood care and education. Most parents identify the ages 3-4 as the earliest age at which children benefit from the use of technology.

It is the way forward.... but

Despite parents' emphasis on play and their worries regarding their children's use of technology, many educators have observed that children are allowed to use technology to such an extent at home that it is negatively influencing on the children's behaviour and physical activity levels in crèche or pre-school. Some educators' fears that overuse of technology is leading to ADHD and behavioural issues amongst others are generally unfounded according to the research but that does not take away from the struggles many educators face in managing children within their service. Some educators for example struggle with aggressive and violent behaviour when pre-schoolers copy violent TV programs or videogames that they have been exposed to through older siblings.

Many educators, however, also see the benefits of technology use and believe that engaging with technology is not only necessary in order to acknowledge children's interest and not to create a forbidden fruit but can also work to bridge the 'app gap' that leaves some children from disadvantaged backgrounds less technologically competent than their better-off peers, affecting their later ability to engage with technology in formal schooling. What we know from many educators who have engaged with technology for a while is that technology use is easier to control in ECCE settings and can valuably be used to complement curriculum, learning and different themes

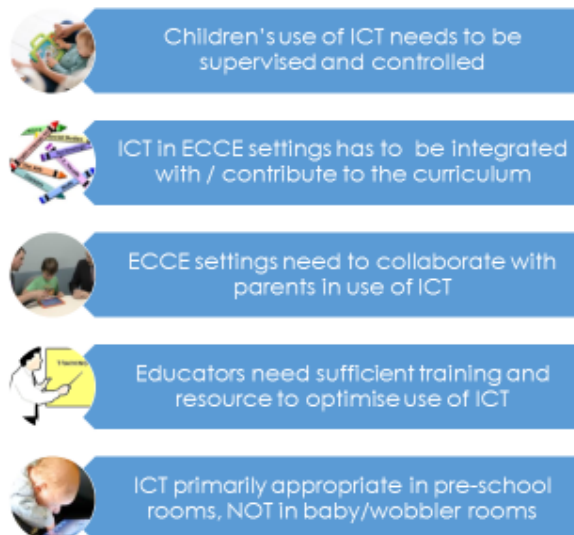
informing work with children. When used as a means to an end, rather than an end in itself, and when properly planned, technology can provide an innovative, engaging and creative way of expanding children's curiosity and learning.

What is crucial to introducing or using technology in early childhood care and education is a good partnership with parents who often feel very strongly about the use of technology, in particular television and Ipads, in their children's ECCE setting. According to our research, for example, very few parents find technology use appropriate in baby, wobbler and toddler rooms while they are happy for their pre-schoolers to learn through the use of technology when done appropriately and selectively.

Some interesting uses of ICT

- Many educators have found that different apps and uses of technology are beneficial to supporting the inclusion of children with additional needs
- Interactive whiteboards can be used for a whole variety of learning and themes from Aistear and Siolta
- There are many technology devices such as interactive world maps, music and movement programmes and communication tools such as Skype that can be used to add another dimension onto important themes such as cultural awareness, citizenship, geography and new forms of play and interaction.

Some good advice....



Children's use of ICT needs to be supervised and controlled

ICT in ECCE settings has to be integrated with / contribute to the curriculum

ECCE settings need to collaborate with parents in use of ICT

Educators need sufficient training and resource to optimise use of ICT

ICT primarily appropriate in pre-school rooms, NOT in baby/wobbler rooms

Do you use technology in your setting or do you have some important insights or interesting experiences in this regard? If so, we would love hear from you to learn more about how you have used technology and what opportunities and benefits it has provided.