

Do you get more intelligent and more empathetic children if they use iPads and iPhones? Sesame Street believes so.

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'Have you ever seen a three year old playing with a BlackBerry? He cannot do much with it. Give him an iPhone and he will get going straightaway.' iPhones have touchscreens and, yes, touchscreens and children is a natural combination. This is according to Michael Levine who is researching the use of digital media for [Sesame Workshop](#), the organisation behind the children's programme Sesame Street. Levine is in the Netherlands this week at the invitation of [Cinekid](#) and the [Bernard van Leer Foundation](#).

Anyone who has ever seen a child playing with a touchscreen smartphone or iPad knows that Levine is right. My niece of two and a half already knows how to take a photo with an iPhone, and how to view it and enlarge it in the photo album. Simply press the button and sweep over the screen.

Sesame Workshop is keeping a close eye on the rise of touchscreens. Four years ago, the organisation opened a special centre – the [Joan Ganz Cooney Centre](#) – that carries out research into the impact of digital media on children's development. Levine is the founder of the centre. There are already Sesame Street applications to build your own Elmo, for example, and there are Sesame Street e-books and films. But many more, and better, applications are needed.

Sesame Street started as a children's programme in 1969. It was a new concept as it used many scientific pedagogical insights. The result: a revolutionary educational children's programme. Sesame Street now wants to achieve the same level of change using touchscreen devices.

What does Levine believe is so great about an iPad? Its intuitive touchscreen, of course. It is a means to stimulate creativity. You can bring the device with you anywhere, even outdoors. Looking through the camera, augmented reality allows children to learn everything about their surroundings. What is that animal called? What kind of plant is that? Important too is that you can simply put a tablet on your lap, avoiding a screen that acts like a wall between a child and the rest of the room. Parents and children can play with it together. And that is important because – in the original Sesame Street philosophy – children learn most when interacting with an adult. A laptop is a 'more individual' device.

In itself, an iPad is an inanimate thing. Whether children learn from it depends on the children's applications that are developed for it. A glimpse in Apple's iTunes store or in the Android store reveal that there are many such apps. They are divided into three types: e-books, games and apps with which you can make something (creative apps). A popular app in the Netherlands is *Leren met Woezel en Pip* (learn with Woezel and Pip), with which children learn about colours, numbers and shapes.

Not everybody believes that touchscreens are good for children. Some scientists believe that they are bad for children's development and concentration. And the American Academy of Pediatrics issued a statement this week which states that very young children of up to two years of age develop better 'away from the screen'. Contact with people is better than contact with a screen, alleges the AAP.

'Certainly there are dangers with touchscreens', admits Levine. He believes that the digital

Sesame Street focuses on a slightly older group of children (4 to 11 years) than the television programmes (up to 4 years). 'We also take safety into account. We do not want children to see sites with inappropriate information or images.'

But ultimately, Levine sees possibilities. 'You can stimulate the development of the brain with applications. Ninety percent of the brain is formed in the first five years of life. It is not only about cognitive skills. Creativity, empathy, and social skills are some of the things you can learn through applications. We are currently carrying out much research into this.'