

For Reading and Learning, Kids Prefer E-Books to Print Books

By Jeremy Greenfield, Editorial Director, Digital Book World, [@JDGsaid](#)

Given the choice between reading e-books or print books, children prefer e-books, a new, exploratory field study shows. Children who read e-books also retain and comprehend just as much as when they read print books, the study also suggests.

A new “QuickStudy” – so named for its short duration and the small size of its sample group – from the Joan Ganz Cooney Center observed 24 families with children ranging in age from three-to-six reading both print and e-books in the Summer and Fall of 2011. Most of the children in the study preferred reading an e-book to a print book and comprehension between the two formats were the same.

“If we can encourage kids to engage in books through an iPad, that’s a win already,” said Carly Shuler, senior consultant for industry studies at the Joan Ganz Cooney Center at Sesame Workshop is a New York based non-profit organization dedicated to understanding how children learn through digital media.

Enhanced e-books – those that have more bells and whistles than e-books, like interactive features and games – were also compared in the study with their regular e-book counterparts. Children recalled fewer of the details of the content of enhanced e-books versus the same e-book.

“Kids were more focused on tapping things and that took away from their comprehension as well as the interaction between the parent and the child,” said Shuler.

The findings from the study are preliminary and the Joan Ganz Cooney center will be conducting larger, more rigorous studies of the issue. Two more QuickStudies are currently being conducted around the questions of why parents and children select certain e-books over others and how parents and children read e-books together.

Until now, aside from outcries by hysterical [parents](#) and [media](#), there has been [no real study of whether reading to children with e-books is better or worse for them](#) in terms of developmental or educational value than reading to them with print books.

“As far as I’m aware, at this juncture, there hasn’t been substantive research done on this,” said Nicole Deming, a spokesperson for the Children’s Book Council, a New York-based industry association for children’s book publishers.

Despite the lack of research, “[many](#)” parents have their reservations about reading to their children on an iPad or other device before bed, according to a recent report in the *New York Times*.

Researchers are hesitant to make such judgments.

“I don’t think we’re ready to say ‘picture books in their print form are better and will always be better,’” said Junko Yokota, a professor and director of the Center for Teaching Through Children’s Books at National Louis University in Chicago, who claims she was misrepresented in the above-referenced *New York Times* article as supporting the idea that e-books are bad for children.

Regardless, both publishers and parents are [diving head first into e-books and book applications for children](#).

Related: [Are Children’s E-Books Really Terrible for Your Children?](#) | [How to Build a Best-Selling Children’s Book App](#)



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Children's E-book Growth

About 7.4% of children's books sold in the first three quarters of 2011 were digital (excluding young adult titles), according to Bowker, a company that tracks the book industry. That compares with 13.5% across all book publishing segments over the same period.

Adoption of digital has been slower for children's books than it has for other kinds of books in part because of a technology lag, according to Kelly Gallagher, vice president of publishing services at Bowker, who is currently working on a report about the children's book publishing industry.

"The growth rate appears to be slower and it flattened out a bit this year," said Gallagher. "That is related to the technology not being as capable to fully give the book-like experience for a children's product, as opposed to the flat narrative of adult trade fiction."

Still, Gallagher predicts that share of digital units in children's book publishing could double in 2012 to as much as 15%. This holiday season will see homes acquire second or even third tablets and children will have sole use of first generation iPads handed down by parents who upgrade to an iPad 2 or other, newer tablet, further driving growth.

There are about 50 million tablets in circulation worldwide, according to [a recent report by IHS iSuppli](#), an El Segundo, Calif.-based technology research unit of global research firm IHS. There will be over 150 million in circulation by the end of 2012.

Seizing the Opportunity

A mix of "traditional" players and start-ups have been producing, selling and marketing children's book apps.

While children's publishing powerhouses like Scholastic Inc. and Sesame Workshop have robust digitization and app-development efforts, upstarts have come to market with children's book apps, too. Encinitas, Calif.-based Oceanhouse Media produces, markets and sells Dr. Seuss and Berenstain Bears children's book apps, for instance.

"Three years ago there was not much of anything," said Michel Kripalani, president of Oceanhouse. "The app market was just getting rolling."

Today, there are dozens of small companies like Kripalani's as well as hundreds of "mom and pop" shops, single developers that produce a one-off app product. And it's all because of Apple.

"You can build a product and submit it to Apple and ten days later – after approval [Apple will not sell an app in its store if it does not meet certain technical requirements] – you're available for sale," said Kripalani. "All of a sudden, they've created this environment that anyone who is able to gather the technical and marketing skills is able to build a publishing house."

National Geographic, the Washington, D.C.-based nature magazine company, publishes magazines and books targeted at children. National Geographic has published two children's apps, including the iTunes store hit, Weird But True, an app based on the print book series of the same name.

Scholastic has published 14 apps, including Magic Schoolbus Oceans, an extension of the Magic Schoolbus franchise.

"It's been a very good business for us – and profitable," said Deborah Forte, executive vice president of Scholastic and president of Scholastic Media, the division within the company that produces apps.

Sesame Workshop currently has 160 e-books and 25 apps and "is in the business [of electronic publishing] to stay," said Jennifer Perry, vice president of worldwide publishing for Sesame Workshop.

An Industry Hungry for Research

Beyond knowing what is good or bad for children – information that the children's book industry has largely

benefited from – industry players badly want to know how kids interact with their electronic products: whether they like them and if they understand the interactive conceits that adults take for granted on touch-screen devices, like swiping and double-taps.

Sesame Workshop, which shares workspace and a common founder with the Joan Ganz Cooney center, is conducting its own research.

“What we look at when we test right now is usability,” said Mindy Brooks, assistant director of research for Sesame Workshop. “How do kids and parents use the device? What kind of UI design is most intuitive to a majority of users? Does the child understand how to use the apps features?”

Oceanhouse, a much smaller organization than Sesame with only seven full-time employees currently, is so interested in this kind of information that it has hired its own research contractor.

“The goal of the research is to inform the development of future apps and potential updates to apps on the market,” said the Oceanhouse research consultant, Liz Griffiths, who has a master’s degree in developmental psychology from the Teachers College at Columbia University.

One early finding of Griffiths’s research is that children often accidentally skip pages when reading apps. As a result, Oceanhouse is looking into ways of ensuring children read the whole story in a book app.

This one finding is just the tip of the potential iceberg of learning to be done – and the industry is hungry for such knowledge.

“We want to see learning studies done and see a cross comparison about different apps and e-books,” said Sesame’s Perry, who added that it’s no easy task due to the array of possible formats and devices.

When E-Books Don’t Matter

Some children and parents don’t have to wrestle with the question of how much iPad time is too much iPad time.

Reading to Kids is a Los Angeles-based non-profit organization that gives away 700 to 1,200 books a month to local disadvantaged children. For Reading to Kids, e-books are out of the question.

“For the population we serve, e-books are not something we deal with every day,” said Karen Kiss, managing director of Reading to Kids. “The idea of giving 700 to 1,200 kids a Kindle would be fantastic, but that would be beyond our economic reach.”

Reading Is Fundamental, a national non-profit based in Washington, D.C. dedicated to promoting reading and literacy among disadvantaged children, had plans to experiment with supplying those they serve with e-readers, but federal funding cuts put those plans on hold.

Beyond expanding the reach of books to new audiences now growing up in an increasingly digital world, the organization hoped to head off what it sees as a gap between children who grow up with the latest learning tools and reap commensurate advantages later in life, and those who do not.

“I’m very concerned that there’s going to be another digital divide,” said Carol Rasco, president and CEO of Reading Is Fundamental. “I fear that many of our children in low-income areas aren’t going to have as much access to the readers themselves or tools needed to read the digital books. It’s something that is really moving along and we’re going to leave some of those children behind. They won’t have the skills needed when schools, all of a sudden, go to e-readers for their text-books, perhaps.”

When E-Books Matter the Most

For some child-parent relationships, an e-book can provide infinitely more value than a printed book.

Parents away from their children are unable to read to them in any conventional sense. That’s where A Story Before Bed comes in. The start-up helps parents record themselves reading an e-book so that their children can enjoy that experience when the parent is not around.

“What’s great about children’s books is that unlike any other book they were meant to be read together,” said Hillel Cooperman, co-founder of A Story Before Bed. “The question as whether you should read to your kids on a different medium is a stupid question. Reading to your kids is good, period.”

While his product is only useful in the world of e-books, his sentiment was echoed by nearly every expert,

observer and researcher we spoke with for this piece: It's good to read to your children, regardless of format.

At Sesame and Scholastic, part of the mission is to encourage reading, and devices that get kids excited about books are welcome, regardless if their paper and binding or full-color touch-screen.

"One of the things we're about at RIF," said Rasco from Reading Is Fundamental, "is what do we do to push a kid's button to get them turned on to reading? There is nothing to indicate right now that I'm sending poison into a child because I'm suggesting they use an e-reader."

Further, Rasco is the parent of a 38-year-old with disabilities and says, as have many other parents with children with disabilities in multiple media reports, that e-books and apps have helped them interact with their children.

It's still the very early days of e-books, enhanced e-books and book apps for children. The iPad, which came out in January 2010, and other e-readers and tablets that make children's books a more attractive play for publishers, have been around for such a short period of time that deep, academic study of their efficacy as educational tools has yet to be done.

What researchers, observers and industry players all seem to agree upon for now is that getting kids interested in reading is a worthy cause, regardless of the format.

Write to [Jeremy Greenfield](#)

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