

KIDS.

HELP THEM THRIVE IN EVERY WAY

Parents.
BEST
APPS FOR
KIDS
- 2021 -



Screen-Time **Wins**

Devices don't have to be a drain on their brain. We chose 24 apps that kept kid testers entertained and (shh!) learning. →

by **KAREN CICERO,**
REBECCA RAKOWITZ,
and **JENNA WIRTH**

photograph by
TIM MARSELLA

WITH APPS FOR
SCIENCE, READING,
EXPLORING, AND
MORE, THERE'S A WORTHY
PICK FOR EVERY KID.



GEOGRAPHY AND NATURE

BEST MARINE LIFE
MarcoPolo Ocean



Kid testers took a deep dive into this colorfully animated app that offers fun building activities plus free play. While making their own submarine and noodling with habitat puzzles, they picked up cool facts about life underwater, such as that an octopus's arm can stretch double its length. As one parent of a tester happily warned, "Be ready for a slew of 'Mom, did you know ___?'" Ages 3 to 7, free

BEST U.S. GEOGRAPHY
Stack the States



A fun way to learn state capitals, flags, and trivia, this app gives kids multiple-choice questions. Each correct answer earns a player a googly-eyed state, and then comes testers' favorite part: piling up the states like Jenga pieces. "It teaches kids as much about the states as a regular geography class would cover," said a parent of one tester. Ages 8 to 12, \$3

BEST WORLD GEOGRAPHY
Barefoot World Atlas



A magical 3-D globe entices kids to explore countries, landmarks, and historical facts through engaging games and quizzes. One 9-year-old told us the interactive app is a "super-cool and fun" way to learn about geography and word culture. Can't decide where to travel? Kids can shake their device, and the app will take them to a "surprise" destination. Ages 4+, \$5, available only from the App Store

BEST ANIMAL LEARNING
Peekaboo Barn



Tiny testers loved pressing on the barn doors to reveal a new animal and the sounds that it makes. Cool feature: You (or the grandparents) can record your voice saying the animal names for your kid to hear. Ages 1 to 3, \$2, not available from Google Play

BEST NATURE
Seek by iNaturalist



When you're walking through the park and your child asks, "What's that?" take a snap on this app and it'll give you the answer (plus extra details to impress). One tester used it to ID gulls at the beach and liked that the app saved her nature shots into her own picture gallery. There's also the option to do badge-earning nature challenges as a family. Ages 4+, free, not available from Amazon



Will They Work on My Device?

Unless noted otherwise, you can download all featured apps from the App Store, Google Play, and Amazon.

STEAM LEARNING

BEST FOR CODING
ScratchJr



Kids can program and code their own interactive stories and games with this app that the MIT Media Lab helped develop. "It's a good example of learning a skill in a fun way without realizing it," said the parent of a 5-year-old tester. Ages 5 to 7, free, tablets only

BEST ENGINEERING
Play and Learn Engineering



Kids love designing roller coasters and building robots; you'll love the STEM concepts like gravity and momentum they learn along the way. Plus, parents of testers say this app from PBS Kids was a hit among siblings of different ages and even passed the "Will this keep my kid occupied in a restaurant?" test. Ages 3 to 5, free

BEST MUSIC
Mazaam – the Musical Genius



With 15 games spread across five animal-themed "worlds" and more than 140 musical works, this app helps future Beethovens learn about pitch, tempo, and harmony. In the "World of Eagles," children feed hungry birds while listening to classical music and identifying string and wind instruments. One parent said the app was "both challenging and interesting." Ages 4 to 6, free to try, \$9 for full version, not available from Amazon

BEST MATH
Kahoot! DragonBox Numbers

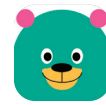


Instead of memorizing math facts, kids develop "number sense" with fun, monster-like characters called Nooms. For instance, they can slice the Noom that represents the number 8 in half to create a pair of 4s. Or Nooms can swallow each other to get bigger. Kid testers played intuitively. Ages 4 to 8, \$5/month for Kahoot!+ Family subscription or \$8 for one-time purchase

TOP LEFT: AMY POSTLE; APPS: COURTESY OF THE BRANDS.

TABLET: PETER ARDITO; APPS: COURTESY OF THE BRANDS.

GENERAL LEARNING



Khan Academy Kids

Five whimsical characters guide children through a huge catalog of interactive books, engaging lessons across subjects, yoga videos, nature articles, and more. With content that now extends to second grade, this app helps children build both classroom and social skills. One parent of a tester said her daughter couldn't get enough of the coloring pages. Ages 2 to 8, free

BYJU'S Learning App featuring Disney

This app puts beloved Disney and Pixar characters like Ariel, Belle, and Woody into the role of teachers. But instead of presenting lessons, the characters take kids on fact-packed adventures. "As a teacher myself, I think this app does an excellent job of helping kids with math and reading concepts," said one mom who tried the app with her

kids, ages 6 and 8. "My daughter didn't even realize the hidden lesson because she felt she was watching a video." A parent zone and progress-report feature help you monitor their learning. Ages 3 to 8, \$10/month, free 14-day trial, not available on Amazon

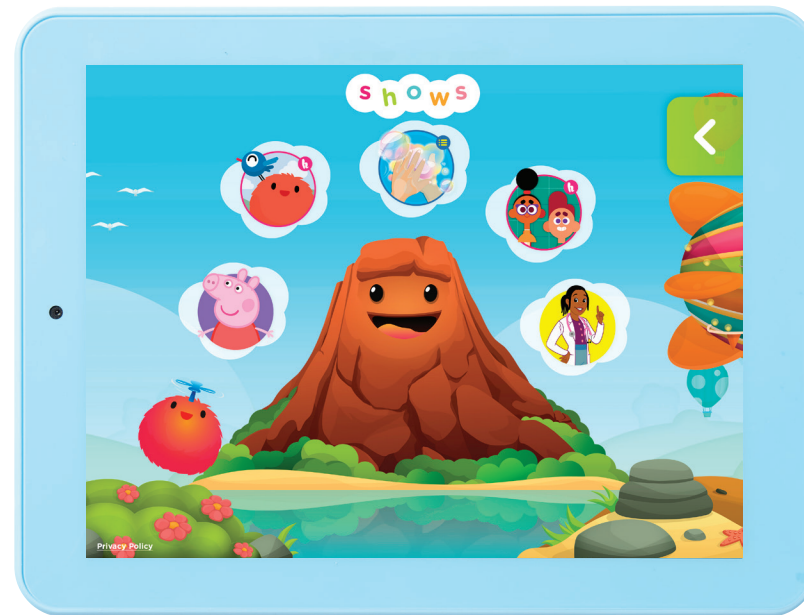


Hopster

As children navigate the app's tropical island setting, they'll find new and familiar cartoons, books, songs, and games to explore. One mom of a tester loved that after her child had watched a couple of videos, the TV-with-a-twist app prompted her to try a different song or game, encouraging something that was more active. Ages 1 to 4, \$8/month after a seven-day free trial



Hopster uses an idyllic island as a backdrop to teach phonics and math.



How We Picked the Winners

For this second annual list, we developed criteria with the help of teachers and screen-time experts. To be considered, apps needed to be ad-free and to have clear learning goals and no in-app purchase offers for power-ups or characters. Each app was then tested and reviewed by kids ages 2 to 12 (and their parents) to confirm the apps were both educational and engaging.

READING AND WRITING

BEST FOR PENMANSHIP
Writing Wizard



Sound effects, stickers, and rainbow designs turn this app into a cool environment for kids to trace capital and lowercase letters. "The animation kept my 4-year-old daughter's attention," said the parent of one tester. Ages 3 to 7, free to try, \$5 for full access

BEST FOR E-BOOKS
Epic – Kids' Books & Reading



This home library of 40,000-plus books, videos, and audiobooks (categorized by reading level and interest) isn't just for bookworms. One parent of a YouTube-obsessed tester was blown away by how user-friendly and motivating this app was: "My son has had it for less than 24 hours and has read almost six books already. Winner, winner!" Ages 2 to 12, \$10/month, not available on Amazon

BEST FOR CREATIVE WRITING
Write About This



Hundreds of writing prompts—some in text format, some photographs—inspired our testers to start writing and telling stories about vacations, family, pizza, and more. Sibs or friends can even work on a piece together. The app also allows kids to start with their own picture or idea. Ages 7+, \$4, iPad only

BEST FOR PHONICS
Teach Your Monster to Read



Cute and colorful monsters introduce kids to sounds and then short words. Parents liked that the app reviews what a child has already learned and builds on it in each session. "My kids are actually learning to read while enjoying the gamey features," said a mom of two testers. Ages 4+, \$5, computer version is free

BEST FOR READING ALOUD
Read Along by Google



Using Google's speech-recognition technology, the app can tell how well kids are reading aloud from a library of 500-plus stories. A reading pal underlines any word that has been skipped and stars those spoken correctly. It can help boost kids' confidence in reading out loud to their class. Ages 5+, free, exclusive to Google Play

PUZZLES

BEST CODING PUZZLES
Thinkrolls Play & Code



Your child won't realize they are basically in physics class as they help their character move through puzzles and mazes. In "basic," "easy," and "hard" modes, players learn about gravity, elasticity, spatial reasoning, and more. They can even use their newfound precoding skills to create puzzles of their own. "I loved that this app was fun, and that it also stretched my daughter to think critically and problem-solve," said one parent of a tester. *Ages 3+, \$7/month or \$47/year after a weeklong free trial, available only from the App Store*

BEST LOGIC PUZZLES
Winky Think Logic Puzzles



From simple matching to complex games, this app offers 180 obstacles, mazes, and multi-touch experiences. "My daughter loves the 'aha' moments of figuring out each level," said one parent of a tester who's been motivated to advance through the harder levels. *Ages 6+, \$3, available only from the App Store*

BEST CROSSWORD PUZZLES
Montessori Crosswords



Starting with three-letter words, kids advance through four levels, eventually completing multi-word crosswords in thousands of different combinations. One parent of a 6-year-old tester said this app was much easier than having her son sit at the table and sound out and write words. "He's the type who doesn't love reading and writing and really needs some sort of incentive—apparently a cute animation is enough—and this seems to be doing the trick." *Ages 3 to 7, \$3, called Montessori Words & Phonics on Google Play and Amazon*

BEST SHAPE PUZZLES
Busy Shapes



With shape changing and color mixing, this app encourages your kid to think outside the box in order to successfully drag figures into the proper holes. Even though the levels get progressively more challenging, one mom of a tester was happy to see that her 5-year-old was "persistent in figuring out the next level rather than getting frustrated." *Ages 18 months to 4 years, \$3, available only from the App Store*



SOCIAL SKILLS

BEST SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL LEARNING
Daniel Tiger's Grr-ific Feelings



Who better to teach your child about feelings than the friendly, familiar face from the make-believe neighborhood? Through games that prompt laughter and deep breathing—as well as a photo booth to capture various moods—this app helps kids identify and manage different emotions. *Ages 2 to 5, \$3, available only on tablets*

BEST VIDEOS
BrainPOP Jr. Movie of the Week



This collection of three-to-five-minute animated videos has grown to include topics like gratitude, conflict resolution, and mindfulness, in addition to all the great shorts on the arts, math, and history. In the video on

empathy, characters explain how children can identify their own and other people's emotions. They then explore how to be compassionate when a friend isn't feeling their best. The videos come with "easy" and "hard" quizzes for an added learning boost. *Ages 6 to 8, free movie of the week, \$6/month for full access*

BEST SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL GAMES
PBS Kids Games



Your child can discover new ideas and worlds alongside their fave characters from *Wild Kratts*, *Super Why!*, and *Odd Squad*. Games are added weekly, and the learning goals extend to social skills such as kindness and mindfulness and life skills like healthy habits and daily routines. "My son would have fun with this app even without the characters," said the parent of a tester. *Ages 2 to 8, free*

