making the best use of technology

a Pre-school Learning Alliance mini guide

Information and communication technology (ICT) is here to stay and is probably the most rapidly changing development in recent history. Young children playing with iPads is becoming the norm because children today are part of an increasingly digital generation. The challenge for us as practitioners is making the best use of the learning opportunities that ICT presents, whilst maintaining children's safety and wellbeing.

Understanding ICT and technology

ICT is generally referred to as 'any product that can store, transmit, process, retrieve, receive and manipulate information'. It is often screen based and has the capability to be online. Most families use ICT in a variety of ways. Popular media such as Facebook, Snapchat, WhatsApp, Twitter and Skype have introduced new words to the English language and have given people a means by which they can access information, play and communicate at any time.

ICT can support children's learning with age-appropriate and innovative websites, programmes and applications, but they have their limitations in an early years setting and must be seen in the broader context of a balanced programme of activities and experiences across the educational programmes.

Technology is much broader and includes things such as DVDs, remote controls, programmable toys, machines, music and audio systems, and the processes by which we use science and knowledge to solve practical problems, for example, inventing machinery to do a specific job.

Technology is an aspect of 'Understanding the World' in the Early Years Foundation Stage, whereas ICT is not mentioned specifically.

Recognising technology in your setting

An audit and analysis of all equipment that can be described as technology is a really useful way to identify missed opportunities. For example, an old style telephone with a dial encourages number recognition, hand eye coordination and role play as children have pretend conversations. A home corner kitchen layout is full of technology with buttons, knobs, switches, timers and gadgets, but is often only credited with enabling imaginative play. A digital camera can record a sequence of events such as seeds growing or a tower being built – the activity follows on as children help to download, edit, print and sequence the photographs. All of these seemingly 'normal' activities incorporate technology and a wide range of learning and development opportunities. As always it is the ability of the practitioner to both recognise and facilitate the learning that is vital.

As a team, share your thoughts and aim to reach a consensus as to why and how you should make use of technology in your setting. Starting with the learning and development requirements of the EYFS, stipulate the areas where technology has a role to play and how it supports all areas of learning and development. Then identify and understand the safeguarding and welfare requirements that impact on the use of technology in your setting and how these are assessed under the *Inspecting safeguarding in early years, education and skills* (Ofsted 2015) guidance.

Enabling environments

Screen based ICT offers only a narrow range of sensory input i.e. sight and sound. Children need enabling environments that ignite their curiosity and enthusiasm for learning through play, within a mix of child-led and adult-initiated activities.

Having enough room and seating for more than one child to access a computer at the same time encourages interaction between peers and will prompt conversations, idea sharing and problem solving together.

ICT should be integrated into other activities such as mark making so that children are able to explore a full range of media and materials. Digital cameras can be used to record and review learning together, for example, photographing a sequence of events during a science session where children are working with sand and water; reviewing them later will encourage children to remember processes, review their achievements and maybe reflect on possible extensions to the activity.

Practitioners should model safe use of technology and can encourage children who are more familiar with technology to support others. There is no need to formally teach technology skills; supporting experimentation will help children to get the most from technology in a more meaningful way.

Software must be age appropriate, open-ended and interactive; software that only requires children to keep pressing a button until they get the right answer should be avoided.

ICT Procedures

Settings will need procedures in place for the safe use of ICT, including access to the internet, how children are kept safe online and how parents are supported with information about keeping their children safe online at home.

The amount of time children spend looking at screens should be limited. Recommendations vary according to age, but the American Academy of Paediatrics states that children under the age of two should be discouraged from using ICT and that children aged two to five years should not be staring at screens for more than two hours a day in total. However, research and attitudes are changing all the time, so make sure that you are well-informed and kept up-to-date with new research.

Find out what children and their parents use at home, and how they keep their child safe online. Share ideas for using ICT creatively at home to promote learning and development, and offer information about organisations that can support them if they have concerns.

Further information

Child Internet Safety www.childinternetsafety.co.uk

Kidsmart www.kidsmart.org.uk

Think U Know www.thinkuknow.co.uk

Alliance resources

Online Safety – Mini Guide

Essential Policies & Procedures for the EYFS (A081) Pre-school Learning Alliance

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