Common Sense Media's

Family Guide to Kids' High-Tech Toys

How to Manage This Year's Top Tech Toys

by Caroline Knorr

The holidays are traditionally the time for the big gifts that kids have been begging for all year. Stores and online retailers are gearing up for the rush with high-ticket electronics like e-readers, tablet computers, fancy phones, handheld game consoles, and even tricked-out learning tools for preschoolers.

This year's crop of devices promises exciting stuff—like the ability to pack all of your kids' books into one tiny digital device or practice math drills en route to Grandma's house. But if you don't read all of the fine print (and, let's face it, who does?), these new products' high-tech bells and whistles may catch you off guard.

Often, it's not until your kids start taking advantage of the fancy features that you realize what the devices can do. That new tablet computer your daughter uses to do online research for her book reports also lets her video chat with friends at midnight. The smartphone your son uses to text you for a ride also "helped" him rack up $60 in charges playing the new multiplayer app with in-game purchases. And many high-tech devices require consistent care and feeding by way of expensive software upgrades that really add up over time.

The manual that comes with the device may cover the basics, but when it comes to managing how your kids use them, that's up to you. To help you figure it out, we've highlighted the top parental concerns—and some potential unwelcome surprises—for each of this holiday's most popular electronics for kids.

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E-readers

WiFi, music, games, apps, social networking, and even ads are showing up on e-readers like the Nook Color and Kindle.

What to watch out for

Multimedia, Web access, price of books, ads

Multimedia: E-readers' ability to play music, download apps, and read to your kid seems cool, but if your kids are opting for the entertainment rather than hitting the books, you may begin to feel that too much of a good thing defeats the purpose.

Web access: Some e-readers connect to the Web, play YouTube videos, do email, and even offer social networking.

Price of books: E-books may be cheaper than regular books, but because you can download books (and apps) whenever you want, costs can add up.

Ads: Some Kindle models run screensaver ads, so kids will see them when they power on.

What to do

- Create rules for reading times (many schools require a certain amount of minutes per night), and set aside different times for just plain fun.

- If you can, turn off the extras until you know your kid can use them responsibly. (The Nook Color, for example, lets you block the Web browser.)

- Keep an eye on your kid's activities, and discuss responsible use. Or seek out e-readers designed just for kids or students that limit some of the Web options.

- Find out whether your local public library offers e-books. Also, consider setting a monthly spending limit, and look into online e-book lending libraries. And about those ads: Talk to your kids about how companies use target marketing to captive audiences.

- Look for books together: The beauty of online purchasing is that you can sort, search, and preview just about any book on any interest. Shop with your kids (and make sure they don't have access to your credit card).

Tablet

Their ease of use, range of apps, and connectivity features make tablets like the iPad 2, Kindle Fire, and Samsung Galaxy Tab great as a combination family computer and entertainment hub.

What to watch out for

Video chatting, app purchases, and screen time

🔊 **Video chatting:** Camera-equipped tablets allow for video chatting, which is fine when it's the grandparents—but less fine when it's midnight and your kid is talking with who knows who.

💲 **App purchases:** Kids can rack up fees both by downloading apps and buying items as part of their games (called in-app purchases).

⏱ **Time-limits:** Because tablets are so easy and fun to use, kids may have a hard time stopping once they get started. And kids can easily lose track of time (and stumble onto age-inappropriate sites) with a tablet's easy Web access.

What to do

- Find games and apps that have real value. There are thousands of apps and games that are fun to play and also help reinforce what your child is learning in school.

- Establish rules for safe and sensible video chatting, and use the device's parental controls (or download a parental control app) to restrict access to specific features until you know your kid can use them responsibly.

- Most devices allow you to password protect access to the device's app store and can also prevent in-app purchases. Definitely make sure you talk to your kids about not buying things without your permission, because app creators can be very sneaky in the way they encourage users to buy stuff.

- Enforce time limits and discuss the importance of staying on age-appropriate, parent-approved Web sites. Make sure you're setting a good example by enforcing time limits on your own usage, too!

Smartphones

Smartphones — the ones kids really want — offer far more than the ability to text. Smartphones have cameras, video, games, location services, Internet access, and social networking.

What to watch out for

Round-the-clock socializing, download fees, social networking

Constant connection: Kids' ability to be constantly connected to their friends via their phones can drain their time — and distract them — from their responsibilities. It's hard for parents to know what's going on in their kids' lives when kids are always using the phone.

Download fees: Music, games, apps, movies, TV shows, and in-app purchases are all available through the phone without ever seeing actual money change hands.

Location services: Nearly all phones come with GPS, which can be used for safety reasons but can also be used to tell other people where to meet you using apps like Foursquare. GPS can also tag photos with their location, which follows the photo when it's posted — unless you turn it off.

What to do

- Set rules for when kids need to be off their phones (during dinner and homework, for example) and when it's OK to use them.
- Many smartphones allow you to restrict access to app stores as well as set content filters so kids can't download age-inappropriate movies and games. Consider giving your kid a pre-paid card to set up an online account.
- Unless you use GPS for safety, turn it off, and have a serious conversation about how location services can compromise your kid's safety.

Handheld game consoles

Game gadgets like Nintendo's DS and Sony's PSP have morphed into full-fledged entertainment devices with rich graphics for games and movies, multiplayer options, Internet access, and social features.

What to watch out for

Age-inappropriate content, online interaction, price of games

Content: Just because the screen is smaller doesn't mean that game violence doesn't impact kids. In fact, screen quality—including 3D—makes games even more immersive. Kids can also download a huge range of movies and TV shows for their handhelds.

Online interaction: Multiplayer gaming, chatting, social networking—these features are all built into handhelds, and you probably won't know who your kid is interacting with.

Price of games: The cost of games is probably one of the biggest shocks to parents of new handheld owners. They can set you back as much as $30 apiece.

What to do

• Check out the device's parental controls and other settings that let you restrict the kind of content that can be downloaded. Help your kid choose quality, age-appropriate games and entertainment.

• Establish rules around online communication—when, where, who—and check in with your kid periodically to see who he or she is interacting with.

• Consider renting games through an online service like Gamefly. And be aware that game companies offer automatic, free downloads for some games. Many handhelds also let you wirelessly share content and games for free—a perk that somewhat offsets the cost of the games.

Want to learn more?

Related Articles

• Gaming Tips
• Setting Rules When You're Surrounded by Video Games
• Setting Parental Controls on the Nintendo DSi

Resources

• Best DS Games
• Best PSP Games
• Best 3DS Games
• Best DSi Games

Learning tablets

Handheld devices like the LeapFrog LeapPad Explorer Tablet, the VTech InnoTab Tablet, and the Vinci Touch-screen Mobile Learning Tablet offer younger kids learning and creative activities — many of which are taught by familiar Hollywood characters.

What to watch out for

Screen time, price of software, commercialized characters whose function is marketing, not education

Screen time: Reading, writing, phonics, counting — all are appropriate pursuits for preschoolers. But every minute spent in front of a screen is a minute not spent doing other activities that are also very important for young kids, like running, playing with others, and interacting with the adults in their lives.

Price of software: At upwards of $25 a pop, the programs that run on these devices aren't cheap. And they're proprietary — meaning they'll only run on one device.

Branded characters: Kids gravitate toward characters they know and love, whether it's a Disney princess or Thomas the Tank Engine. Make sure that there's real educational value — and not a consumer come-on — inside the program.

What to do

• Use in moderation. Set age-appropriate screen limits — and remember to count total screen time (TV, computer, handheld) and balance your kids' days so they get lots of different experiences to help them grow and develop.

• Consider sharing programs with friends and family, look for discounted items, and choose age-appropriate, quality software very carefully.

• Look for programs that use unique characters that aren't used to market other products.

Want to learn more?

Related Articles
• Tips for a Healthy Media Diet
• Setting Screen Limits
• Media Tips for Babies and Toddlers

Resources
• Games for Preschoolers
• Learn to Read Apps

Parent Checklist

Gadget	What to Watch Out For	What to Do
E-readers	Multimedia options Web sccess (YouTube, email, social networks) Additional cost of books Advertising	☐ Create rules for reading times ☐ Turn off the extras until you know your kid can use them responsibly, or seek out e-readers that limit some of the Web options ☐ Rent e-books from the library or online e-book lending libraries ☐ Look for books together ☐ Consider purchasing an e-reader that doesn't come with ads
Tablets	Video chatting and Web access (YouTube, email, social networks) App purchases Screen time	☐ Help your kids choose high-quality, age-appropriate apps and sites ☐ Establish time limits and rules for video chatting ☐ Enable parental controls (or download a parental control app) ☐ Keep your app store password to yourself (or make sure kids get your permission to use it)
Smartphones	Constant connection to friends Download fees GPS services	☐ Set usage guidelines and rules ☐ Establish a budget, or restrict access to the app store so download fees don't sneak up on you ☐ Unless you use GPS for safety, turn it off, and explain how location services can compromise your kid's safety
Handheld game consoles	Age-inappropriate content Online interaction and multiplayer options Price of games	☐ Enable the device's parental controls and other settings that let you restrict content ☐ Choose games together ☐ Set rules for safe, responsible, respectful multiplayer gaming ☐ Seek out free game trials, rent titles online, and buy used when possible
Learning tablets	Screen time Price of software Highly commercialized, branded characters	☐ Establish age-appropriate screen-time limits early ☐ View online software demos before you buy, look for discounted programs, and seek out titles with lots of levels and re-playability ☐ Choose high-quality programs with original, imaginative characters, and avoid overused, branded characters that also market other kids' products

⊙ Time   📶 Web Access $ Price   ▣ Content   💬 Social   🔒 Privacy