

News story: Disadvantaged families to benefit from free early learning apps

Parents will benefit from interactive learning tools and text message tips to support children's early language and literacy at home, as part of a society-wide push to make sure children start school ready to learn.

Families from disadvantaged backgrounds will be given free access to some of the best children's educational apps for smart phones and tablets, the Education Secretary Damian Hinds has announced today (20 February), encouraging parents to think about how to use children's screen time constructively, rather than as an easy distraction.

On average, disadvantaged children are 4 months behind in their overall development at age 5. It grows by an additional 6 months by the age of 11 and by the time they take their GCSEs they are, on average, 19 months behind their peers in overall attainment.

There are hundreds of educational apps for phones or tablets on the market that parents can choose from to support their child's early learning, but there is little reliable information about which are the best or most effective. So the Department for Education will buy subscriptions to high-quality early learning apps and provide access to some of these free of charge to disadvantaged families with children aged two to four, in up to 12 pilot areas across the country.

Education Secretary Damian Hinds said:

No parent has all of the answers. Being a parent is like learning to drive: wonderful, full of new discovery, but at times challenging, with plenty of obstacles to swerve. Our children are growing up in a constantly changing world and it is hard to keep up.

And when it comes to children and technology – that's where a manual can be helpful. Not all screen time is created equal: on one side there are the pressures that come with social media and the time spent looking at a screen, which is a key worry for parents – but on the other, the power of technology and the internet can open up a whole new world when embraced properly.

But it's also difficult to navigate, and often expensive, so I want to support parents of all backgrounds to feel able to embrace its benefits and use it in a measured, sensible way that helps improve children's early development at home.

Screens can be an easy distraction for children, but harnessing the power of technology to support early communication and development means that we have another tool in our arsenal to help young kids

develop those skills.

Mr Hinds also confirmed today that nearly 6,000 families in the north of England will also take part in four new programmes that provide practical tools and advice, such as parenting group sessions, educational toys and books or text message tips sent directly to their mobile phones.

Up to 375 schools and nurseries will be recruited for the projects, run by the Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) and Leeds-based education charity SHINE – building on the Education Secretary's 10-year ambition to halve the proportion of children leaving Reception without the communication skills needed to thrive.

The trials will include:

- Making-it-REAL: 960 families in 120 schools in Greater Manchester and Yorkshire will trial a successful National Children's Bureau programme that trains early years professionals to visit families at home, getting parents more involved in drawing, singing songs and counting with their children, as well as encouraging them to use everyday activities to boost learning;
- Group Triple P (Positive Parenting Program): Trained experts will show parents how to improve their children's language, and social and emotional development through role play, homework exercises and video clips of positive parenting techniques. 1,800 families in the north west will benefit across 150 schools and nurseries;
- Parent Child Home Programme: Trained experts will visit families in Doncaster, Rotherham, Sheffield and Barnsley at home twice a week for 15 months, demonstrating different reading, conversation and play activities, and providing books and educational toys to enrich the home learning environment. The programme will be run by Family Lives and 320 families with two-year-olds will benefit;
- Tips by Text: Parents of four and five-year-olds will be sent three texts each week to encourage activities that help develop literacy, numeracy and socio-emotional skills, such as counting the number of plates on the table. More than 2,700 families from 105 schools in the north east will trial an eight-month study run by the Behavioural Insights Team, who have run other successful text message 'nudge' trials like this.

Education Secretary Damian Hinds continued:

There is more support for childcare and early learning than ever

before, with more than 700,000 two-year-olds from disadvantaged backgrounds having benefited from 15 hours of free childcare a week since 2013. But the vast majority of a child's time is spent at home and what happens here is critical to their development.

The Home Learning Environment can have a huge impact on a child's ability to succeed in life, so I want to support families with hints and tips to propel their child's learning so they are not behind on their first day of school and they can go on to reach their full potential, whatever their background.

The plans set out today build on the Government's work, announced last month, to appoint a new advisory [panel](#) to assess existing apps and produce tips and guidance for all parents to help them make informed decisions about which apps to choose for their children.

The expert panel, chaired by Professor Jackie Marsh of the University of Sheffield, will draw up a set of criteria for assessing an app's quality, which will also help decide which apps the Department will provide to families free of charge.

Local areas will be chosen based on factors including the proportion of children achieving below the expected level of development in communication, language and literacy at age five, as well as a focus on some of the most deprived communities.

Sir Kevan Collins, Chief Executive of the EEF, said:

Parents want the best for their children, whatever their background or wherever they come from. But it can sometimes be difficult to get parents involved in their child's learning in practical ways which make a difference and we know little about how to do this well.

By testing different ways of improving the home learning environment – from texts to parents to home visits – these new trials will give us much needed information about how we can give mums and dads the tools they need to give their child the very best start in life.

I'm delighted that we're able to partner with SHINE on this project. They have excellent networks in the north of England and will help us to make sure we reach those schools, nurseries and families most in need of support.

Fiona Spellman, Chief Executive of SHINE, said:

We're delighted to be partnering with the EEF to deliver the Home Learning Environment Fund. Research consistently shows that

communication and language difficulties in the early years can hold back children for the rest of their time in education.

These programmes are a great way of seeing how we can make a real difference at an early stage and support all children to achieve their potential.