

Chapter 15

Connecting, Collaborating, and Learning Online

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ABSTRACT

This chapter provides an explanation and examples of both established and emerging online tools designed for young children, and the parents and teachers of those children. It details a broad overview of kinds of tools for collaboration and learning, including resources such as social networking and online community sites. Several web resources are evaluated for their usefulness for young children, and their parents and teachers. Key sites and resources are described in terms of their affordances, target audience, and usefulness for learning and collaboration.

INTRODUCTION

Computers, mobile devices, and the internet have become indispensable tools in current U.S. society. Many aspects of work, civic, and home life have been altered by access to powerful computing hardware, software, and networks. The use of these devices has grown so rapidly that social norms, practices, and legal structures are struggling to keep pace. The internet age is a mixed bag of enabling tools, unparalleled access

to information, widespread communication, and dangerous unexplored frontier.

Social networking and “Web 2.0” applications such as Facebook, MySpace, and YouTube have become extremely popular (in just a few short years) across a broad spectrum of ages, from teenagers to adults. It seems that everyone is involved in online sharing, community building, learning, and being entertained. While most high-profile sites and tools are geared towards teens and adults, there are many useful and polished sites and tools for young children and their parents and teachers.

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The difficulty for parents and teachers lies in evaluating and choosing resources that are appropriate in meeting the educational and social goals for these young children. This chapter will help parents and teachers understand the nature of these currently available tools, sites, and other resources.

Objectives

After reading this chapter the reader should be able to select appropriate tools for one's children or students from among the listed resources. The reader will learn about resources also useful for parents and teachers of young children. The reader will obtain a broad knowledge of available online tools for collaboration and learning.

Along the way the reader will also:

- Learn about established and emerging computer and internet resources
- Evaluate resources by comparing them to resources featured in this chapter
- Learn about future trends and issues related to social networking and learning online

It is important that parents and teachers of young children have a basic working knowledge of the types of computer-based and Internet tools that are available. The following is a collection of these categories of tools, including an explanation of each tool and some examples for teachers, parents, children, or all three.

We should note here that while many of these sites are designed for parents and teachers, some are designed for young children themselves. It appears from the research literature that there may be good reasons to limit the amount of screen time for children—particularly very young children (Roberts & Foehr, 2004; Roberts & Foehr, 2008).

SOCIAL NETWORKING

Social networking sites are sites that allow an individual to create a profile, and then view and connect with other people online as “friends”. Facebook (<http://facebook.com>) and MySpace (<http://myspace.com>) are prominent examples in the personal realm, and Linked In (<http://linkedin.com>) is a popular site for professional networking. Facebook, MySpace, and Linked In are not appropriate for use by young children but this does not rule out social networking for children as an option, as you will see below.

The growth of Facebook in the last five years has been nothing short of spectacular. This social network that was originally designed for college students has expanded greatly and is used by children and adults of all ages and stages of life. Many parent and teacher groups use Facebook and other social networking sites to do things like connecting socially, supporting each other, and planning events and activities.

Use of these sites by children raises potential issues such as security, appropriate conduct, and bullying. Many parents are concerned, and rightfully so, about potentially inappropriate uses of social networking and of the resulting consequences. Sites that are established specifically for children give them an opportunity to connect with other children, with more restrictions and monitoring in place than the adult networks implement. Social networking can give children the opportunity to connect with other children that they might not have access to in the physical world. This includes the potential for one to interact with children from various cultures, environments, and nationalities that differ from one's own. Some examples of social networking environments are listed here.

Scuttlepad (<http://www.scuttlepad.com/>) allows children ages 6 to 11 to meet and interact with one another. The site allows children to create profiles and interact much like adults on Facebook, but parents have access to pages because parents are the account holders. Children

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