

The Harvard Graduate School of Education Launches First Apps in its History, Aimed to Spur Literacy in Young Children

*Research-backed apps designed to prompt family conversation throughout the day,
shown to lay the groundwork for learning to read*

CAMBRIDGE, Mass. — April 19, 2021 — Today, the [Harvard Graduate School of Education](#) (HGSE), announced the launch of three learning and literacy apps meant to create and encourage back-and-forth conversation between parents, caregivers and young children. The free apps, [“Small Wonders,” “Photo Play” and “Animal Antics,”](#) were developed by [Reach Every Reader](#), an early literacy initiative funded by the Chan Zuckerberg Initiative and based at HGSE.

The trio of apps are based on research into children’s early language and literacy development that examined home environments in which children develop language and literacy skills. The apps were built to inspire new ways to promote family conversation — a key driver of learning and literacy — at home and during everyday routines, like going to the grocery store, riding in the car, cooking meals, and more. They are designed to be fun and easy to use, creating quality time with a child while boosting the language skills that serve as a foundation to literacy. Joe Blatt, senior lecturer on education at HGSE and principal investigator on the project; Meredith Rowe, Saul Zaentz Professor of Early Learning and Development; and Paola Uccelli, professor of education at HGSE led the team that developed the apps.

“Our research has shown that it’s not just the amount of words a child hears that drives vocabulary growth, but also the diversity of words and the [opportunity to engage in interesting back-and-forth conversations](#) with caregivers that serves as a solid foundation for literacy skills,” said Rowe.

The lessons in the interactive apps are aimed as much at parents and caregivers as at children. In [one of the studies](#) where the apps were tested, with nearly 80 parents and their children, parents were instructed to use the apps *with* their children, rather than handing them the phone or tablet to explore on their own. The parents were from a range of socioeconomic, racial, and educational backgrounds. Overall, the apps elicited the helpful types of language use that

researchers were hoping for — back-and-forth conversations between parent and child, conversation about past events, and a wide range of vocabulary and complex sentences. Families who used the apps more frequently over a few weeks showed more complex conversations when using the apps on a second visit than families who used the apps less frequently.

Over the last year, the pandemic has had a massive impact on early childhood and care centers, with many either closed or operating in a limited capacity. Parents across socioeconomic backgrounds have been home more with their children and are exhausted, [with 99% of parents reporting](#) that their child's early education provider had closed at one point and 75% of parents working from home, according to findings from the Saul Zaentz Early Education Initiative at HGSE. These apps help with relationship building at a time when togetherness is at an all-time high — and they are meant to be easy and joyful, building off parents' everyday routines.

"Our goal with the development of these apps was to encourage conversation through everyday interactions," said Blatt. "Parents are a child's first teacher. Everyday activities are learning moments and the apps enhance and empower parents to engage in sustained, back-and-forth conversation with their children. That dynamic is especially meaningful during the pandemic when we are all together so much more."

Descriptions and features of the apps include:

Small Wonders

"Small Wonders," developed in association with public media producer GBH, provides games, activities, and songs for parents and children to play and sing together, grouped in four themes: food, outdoors, home, and faces. As they play, prompts appear, helping parents keep the conversations going. While the child gets to play and interact in the different scenarios on screen, parents get fun and informative suggestions on how to stimulate conversation at the same time. The app includes a "Grown-Ups" section full of activity tips to support language-building behaviors, and animated dialogues that help parents discover ways to use the app most effectively and to extend this experience away from the screen.

"We were excited to bring our expertise in educational media, intergenerational play and mobile app development to this important and innovative project," GBH's Senior Executive Producer and Director of Digital Partnerships Bill Shribman said. "Our mission to support and encourage both children and caregivers led us to introduce familiar themes in the app to extend back-and-forth conversations into everyday activities."

Photo Play

In "Photo Play," developed in association with FableVision Studios, children can use dozens of stickers, "talk" balloons, and emojis to decorate favorite family photos. By using family photos, experiences with family members and friends become the central characters of "Photo Play." Parents and caregivers are encouraged to stimulate conversation through guided cues, and to enrich vocabulary and develop imagination by engaging in conversations about the shared experiences captured in the photos.

Animal Antics:

"Animal Antics," also developed with FableVision Studios, gives parents and children the opportunity to role-play. Together, parents and children make up stories and take turns recording dialogue for an animal cast in 20 different scenarios. Parents and children use their imaginations and sense of humor, and they practice extending their conversations along the way, with the conversational-turn tracker.

"Intergenerational co-play has always been an important part of our core design principles," said Gary Goldberger, President and Co-Founder of FableVision. "The Reach Every Reader apps are a perfect example of how playful learning can offer families a game-based experience that's filled with surprise and discovery."

These are the first apps ever released by HGSE. They are available for iOS, Google and Android mobile devices.

About the Harvard Graduate School of Education

Founded in 1920, and long a pioneer in the study of language and literacy development, the Harvard Graduate School of Education is an exceptional and collaborative community of faculty, students, and alumni dedicated to improving lives and expanding opportunities through the study and practice of education.

Through master's degrees, doctoral degrees, and professional education programs, HGSE cultivates innovative leaders and entrepreneurs, explores the most important questions in education, and shares exciting ideas and best practices with the world.

About Reach Every Reader

Reach Every Reader is a collaboration of the Harvard Graduate School of Education (HGSE), Massachusetts Institute of Technology's Integrated Learning Initiative (MITili), and Florida Center for Reading Research (FCRR) and College of Communication & Information (CCI) at Florida State University. The initiative was established in 2018 to help all children become readers — developing the skills, knowledge, and interest to read for learning and pleasure. The Reach Every Reader initiative is funded by the Chan Zuckerberg Initiative.

About GBH

GBH is the leading multi-platform creator for public media in America. As the largest producer of content for PBS, and partner to NPR and PRX, GBH delivers compelling experiences, stories and information to audiences wherever they are. GBH produces digital and broadcast programming that engages, illuminates and inspires, through drama and science, history, arts, culture and journalism. It is the creator of such signature programs as *Masterpiece*, *Antiques Roadshow*, *Frontline*, *Nova*, *American Experience*, *Arthur*, and *Molly of Denali* and a catalog of streaming series, podcasts and on-demand video. Find more information at gbh.org.

About FableVision Studios

FableVision Studios is a multimedia production studio that designs and develops a wide array of engaging media and interactives that inspire, teach, and move people to action. Collaborators include broadcasters, publishers, nonprofits, research groups, and museums, including PBS, The Jim Henson Company, Nick Jr., Smithsonian, MIT, and the National Geographic Society. Find more information at www.fablevisionstudios.com.

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