

iPad apps & Early Literacy

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50

fantastic free
iPad apps for
prereaders

with
tips on
how to
explore and
extend them
together with
your child

Write together.

Read together.

Play together.

Sing together.

Talk together.

These are
the five
best things
you can do
with a child
to get her
or him
ready
to read.

Explore apps together.

Apps can supplement the nondigital ways we write, read, play, sing, and talk together.

Children benefit most when you explore apps together with them.

The apps included here are geared towards the five early literacy practices; are free, easy to use, and of high quality; and have zero to very minimal ads.

Write together.

Scribbling and drawing--with a crayon, with chalk, with a stick in the sand, or on an iPad--are forms of writing.

Writing on a tablet with a finger is easy for children who have not yet mastered grasping a crayon.



Write Together with [Squiggles](#)

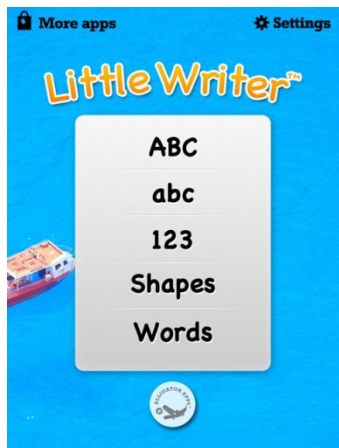
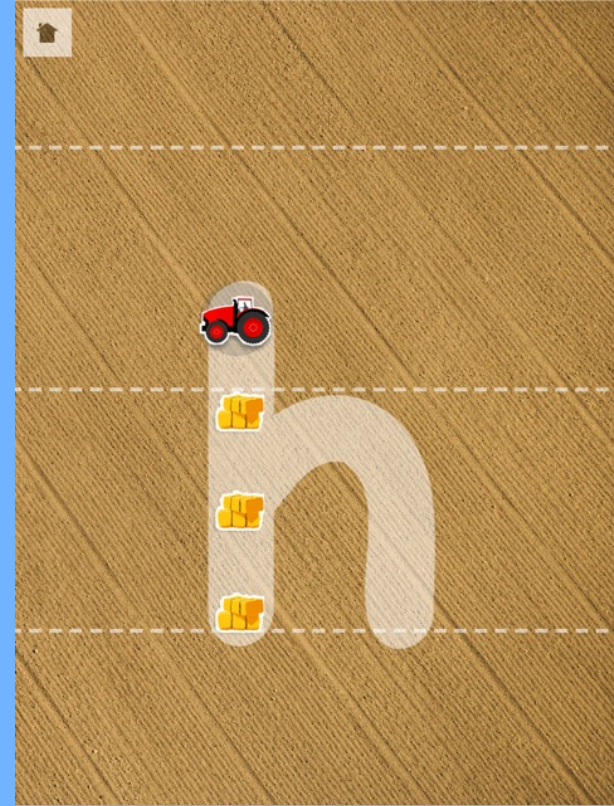
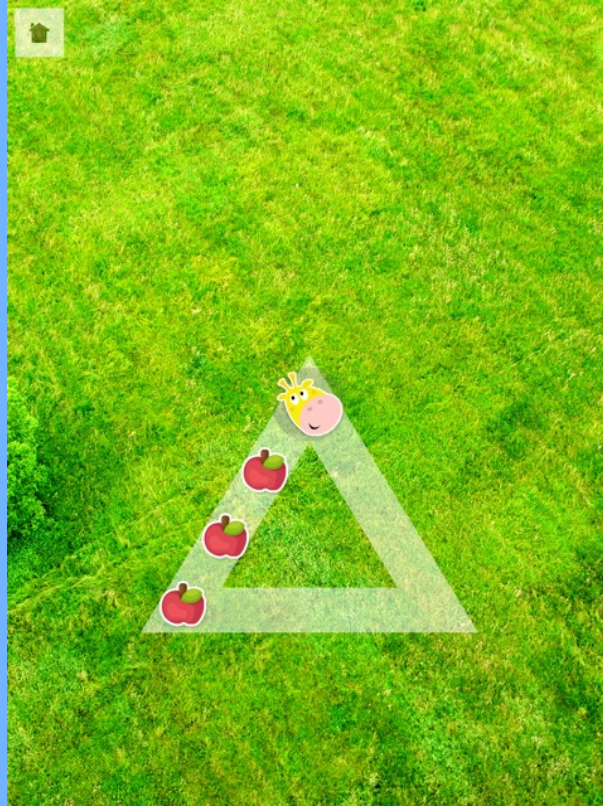
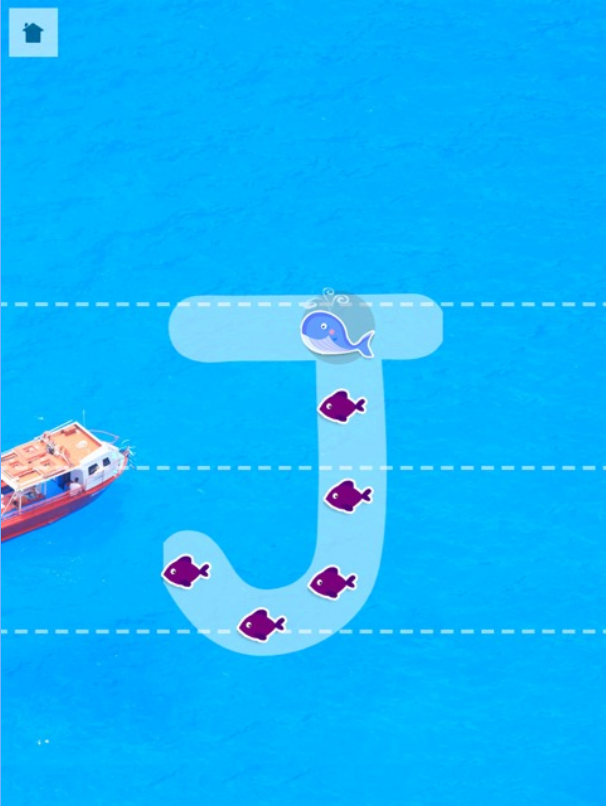
Even a child who can't yet form a letter or shape can draw a squiggle!

In this app, squiggles become significant--as clouds, rocket exhaust, nests, and more. Hitting "GO!" after scribbling makes the whole scene come to life.

[Squiggles](#) teaches kids that our written marks can signify other things, an important concept in beginning to understand the alphabet and words.

See also: Lazoo's [Let's Color!](#)

App includes seven scenes and a free drawing space with different colors and brushes.



Write Together with [Little Writer](#)

Made for just-beginning writers, this well-designed tracing app includes upper and lowercase letters, shapes, and numbers.



Write Together with [Doodle Monkey](#), [Doodle Buddy](#), and [Doodle Dandy](#)

- [Doodle Monkey](#) is perfect when you want a simple, unguided drawing app: canvas, a few colors and brushes, and that's it. Preschool-friendlier than other free unguided drawing apps.
- [Doodle Buddy](#) is also friendly, but offers more options: you can type, use stencils, write in glitter or chalk, and add stickers. Try typing a word, then having your prereader write it out below the type.
- [Doodle Dandy](#) is a visually stunning way to learn about symmetry: choose a color, brush size, and number of times you want a mark repeated—see what happens!



Explore touch with colour, sounds and music without the mess!

Finger Paint With Sounds is a fun way to help young children practice their first interactions with a touch screen.

Simply drag your finger over a colour to select it, and move your finger around the screen to create a trail.



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Write Together with [Finger Paint with Sounds](#)

So fun!

- In “Play Sound Effects” mode, each color has its own sound. In “Music” mode, each has a musical phrase from a different musical genre.
- When you draw, the sound or phrase plays until you lift your finger off the screen.
- For a challenge, try adding a memory game element to this app: “Can you write the letter G in the color that sounds like drums?”

Sounds and music can be turned off during quiet times.

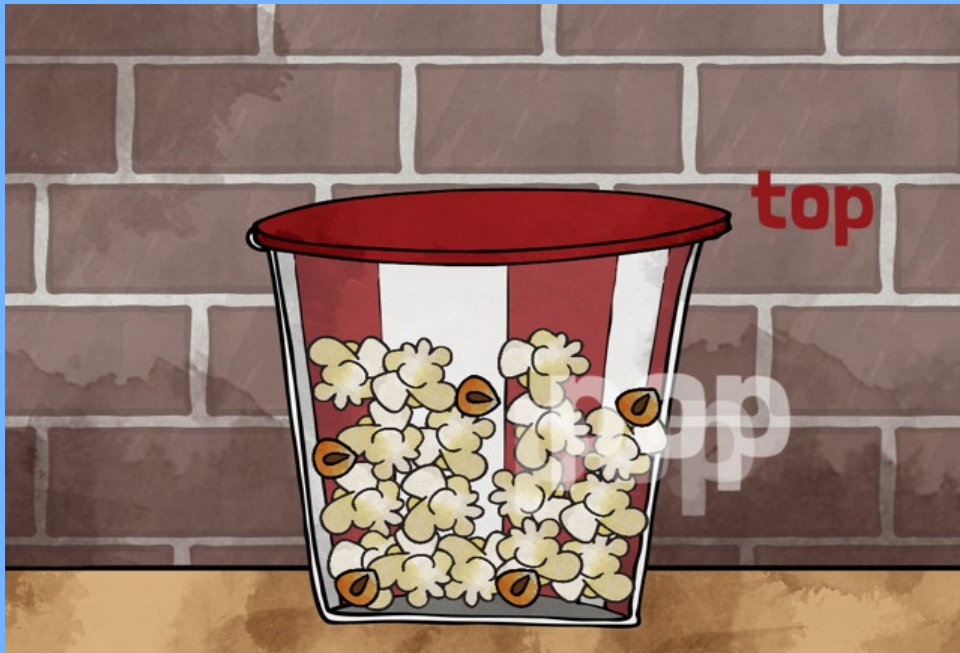


Read together.

Reading together is the #1 thing you can do to get your child ready to read.

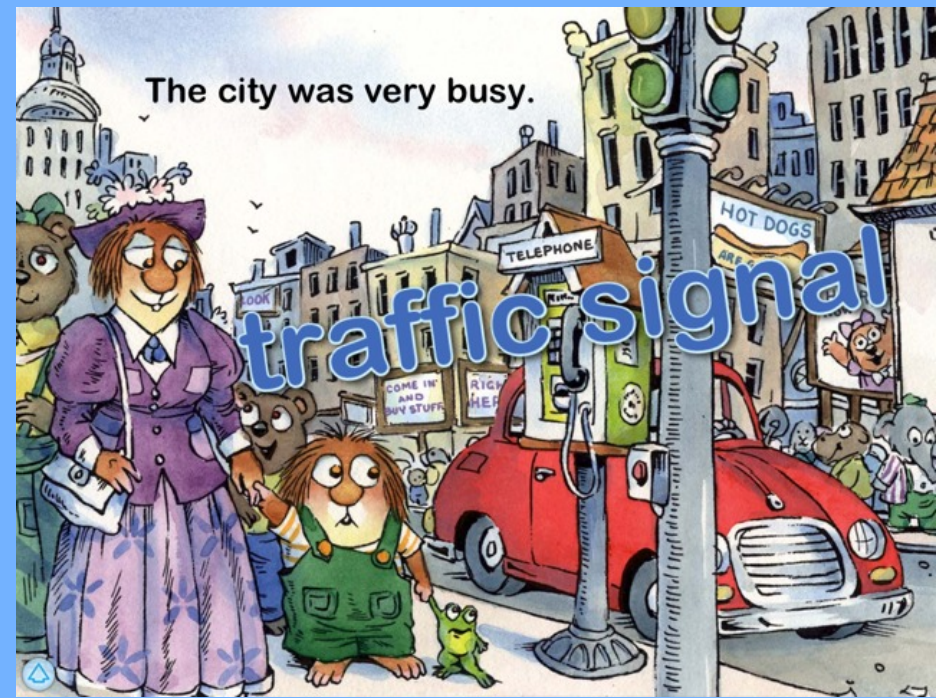
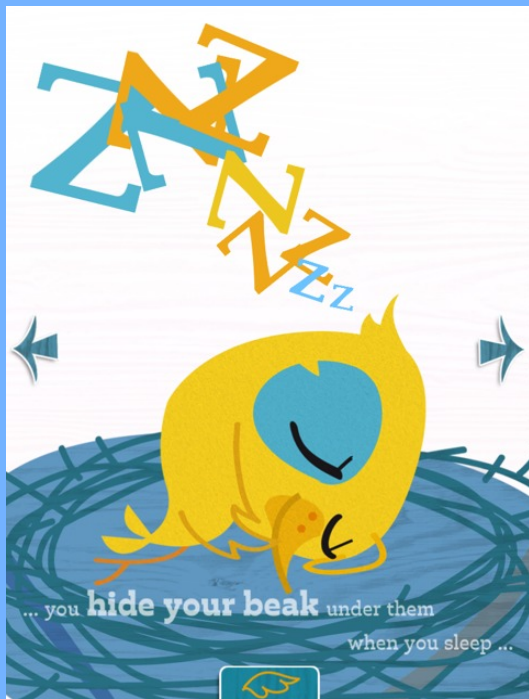
Read ebook apps aloud with your child rather than defaulting to the prerecorded option.

Ask your child to tell the story in his or her own words, too, by “reading” the pictures.



Read Together with [Hideout](#)

- Build a group of rhyming words with the same endings (“cap, map, zap, tap” is one of three included groups)
- Play a fun and first-rate interactive game designed around that word group
- Read (or hear) sentences about what you just did in the game
- [Hideout](#) does a great job reinforcing what you’ve learned without ever seeming boring or drill-like. One of the best apps out there for prereaders and beginning readers!



Read Together with [Pete and the Secret of Flying HD](#) and [Just Me and My Mom](#)

- *Pete* would be a great picture book printed on paper, and its interactive elements make it even stronger. All are done with a light touch and serve to forward the action of the story.
- Tap any item in [Just Me and My Mom](#), and see and hear the word for it. Tap signs in the illustrations' backgrounds ("Hot Dogs" etc) to hear them read aloud, too.

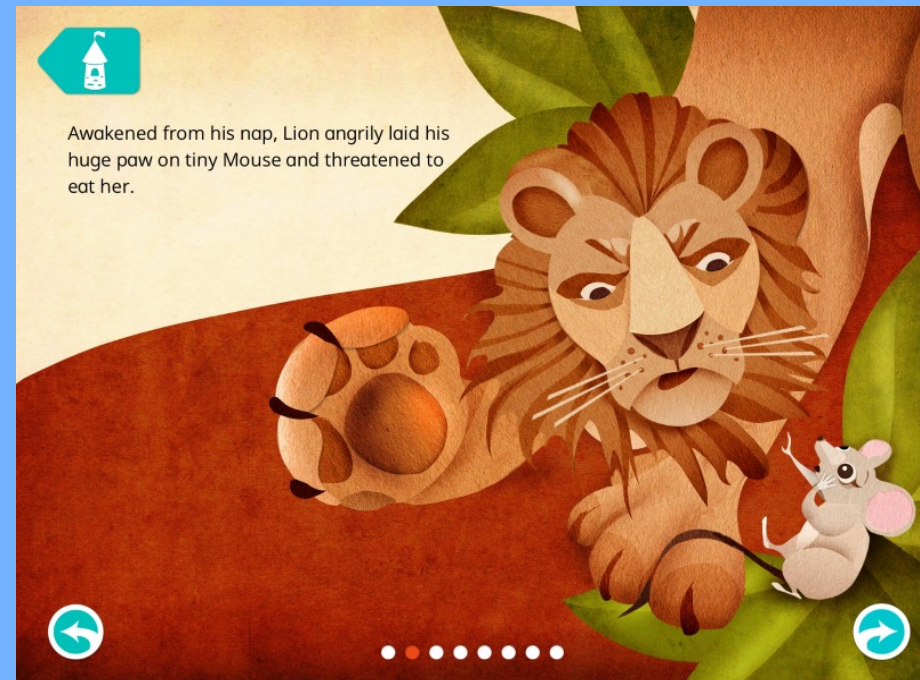


Read Together with Learn with Homer

Learn with Homer could be described as a “learning system”—the app includes stories, poems, fables, nonfiction, and reading-related games/exercises, all with comprehension questions (asked in a fun way) at the end. (more →)

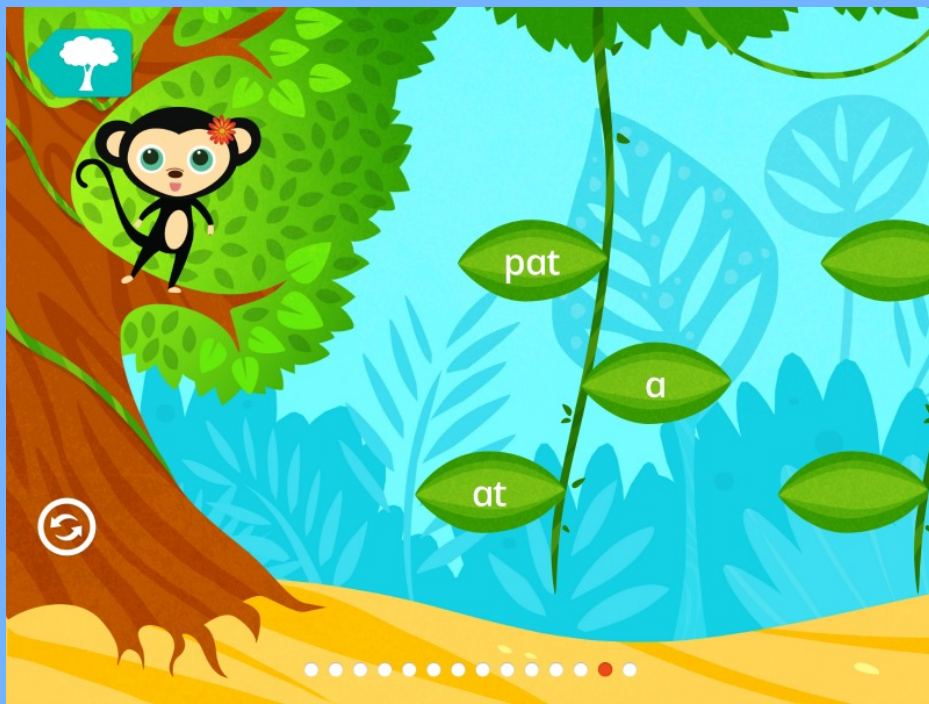


The lion's fur acts as camouflage. Camouflage is the word we use to explain how colors help an animal hide. Can you think of other animals whose fur acts as camouflage?



Awakened from his nap, Lion angrily laid his huge paw on tiny Mouse and threatened to eat her.





- A *lot* of high-quality content is included in the free Learn With Homer app. You can move through it in the suggested “lesson” order, or hop around
- The nonfiction portions are great vocabulary builders on high-interest subjects (the zoo, animal families, etc)



- The reading games/exercises are just right for those beginning to learn to read, with a focus on letter sounds and three-letter words
- Many additional thematic units of content are available for purchase, but no ads interrupt the action of the free app



Read Together with [The Three Little Pigs \(Zubadoo\)](#) and [I Love Mountains](#)

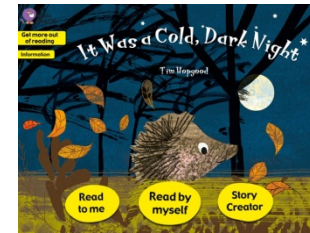
- There are many versions of *The Three Little Pigs* available in the app store; Zubadoo's is simple and skillful.
- Science-curious prereaders will gobble *I Love Mountains* up—a wonderful, detailed look at mountains and their plant and animal inhabitants



The rabbits said, "This is *our* home! Look next door."



Read Together with [Collins Big Cat: It Was a Cold, Dark Night](#)



- This is more than an ebook app—it's also a workshop where you and your pre-reader can build a new story using your original text with background art and props from the ebook.
- After reading the ebook, try creating your own story together. If creating one story isn't enough of a challenge, try seeing how many *different* stories you can create with the given props and scenes.

We're writing our own story!

Add Text Here



The Butterfly Life Cycle:



larva



pupa



imago

ZZZZZ...

Adults thought all small creatures magically sprouted out of other things in nature.

Frogs come from rain,
and butterflies come
from mud!

The first things he looked at were small insects. Anton always took detailed notes about what he observed.

Wow! This bee has
amazing eyes.

In 1673, Reinier de Graaf, sent some of the notes to the Royal Society, and they liked Anton's work!

Read Together with [Shout Science!](#)

This nonfiction ebook app present the stories of three scientists—Maria Sibylla Merian, Anton van Leeuwenhoek, and James Hutton—in an accessible way.

There are few interactive elements, but those present are strong, and the illustrations are wonderful.

Since each story presents a lot to talk about together, take them slowly, ask questions, and consider reading only one per sitting.



Read Together with [The Artist Mortimer](#)



When Mortimer paints the ocean, the ocean vanishes. When he paints a sunset, all sunsets disappear. He soon learns to paint things that people *want* to see vanish: forest fires, a little boy's nightmare.

A strong picture book with light interactive elements, *Mortimer* could spur a great conversation with your child. (What would she paint if she were Mortimer?)

Play together.

Through play--whether dressing up, playing house, or solving a puzzle together--children learn how the world works and practice putting thoughts into words.

Exploring interactive apps together can supplement (but not replace) other forms of play.



Play Together with [Alien Assignment](#)



- A fun photo scavenger hunt-like quest with a backstory: aliens need help repairing their ship and other items, and “learn” how to repair them through photos you and your child are prompted to take.
- Example: “Our helmet is cracked! Take a photo of something you wear on your head to help us repair it!”
- Note: requires iPad with camera. Find under iPhone, not iPad, apps.



Play Together with [Sock Puppets](#)

- Choose from six puppets and several sets and act out and record 30-second scenes
- Scenes can be saved for later playback and shared to Facebook or YouTube
- Once you record a voice sample, you can set pitches for the puppets. When you act out a scene in your own voice(s), the app will alter your voice according to which puppet you're using before playback
- Don't know where to start? Record your child singing the ABC song while tapping a different puppet for every few letters, then play it back



Play Together with [Monkey Drum](#) and [Tap & Sing by Storybots](#)

- Tap out your own rhythm on a drum or rhythm and melody on a keyboard; watch and listen as the monkey plays it back to you perfectly. Experiment with tapping out the syllables of your child's name, the street you live on, and other important words in your child's life.
- With nods to indicate which to tap, the creatures in [Tap & Sing](#)—each of which correspond to a note in the scale—enable you to play three favorite songs. They can also be tapped independently. Experiment and pick out other songs with your child by ear.



F

Firefighter

**A-Z****H**

Hard Hat

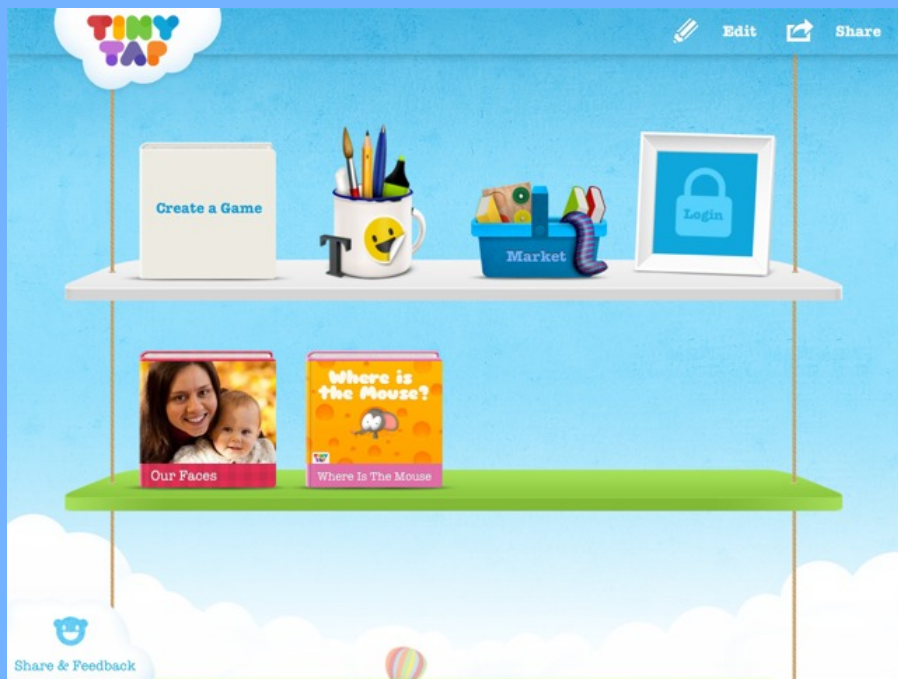
**A-Z****L**

Laughing

**A-Z**

Play Together with [My A-Z](#)

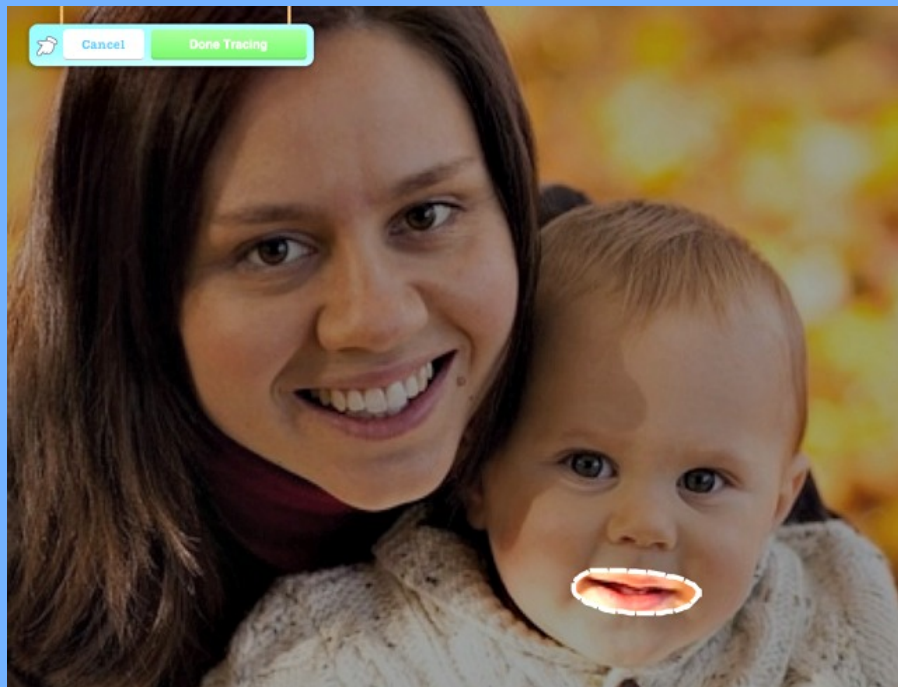
- This versatile stand-out app allows you to make alphabet flash cards with your own photos. You can make several cards for each letter and record up to 30 seconds of audio for each letter. (Note: requires iPad with camera. Also available for iPhone)
- Make A-Z decks *with*, not for, your child. Take photo walks collecting pictures for “our alphabet”. Make a neighborhood alphabet, a vacation alphabet, an alphabet of actions (“What should we do for Z? Let’s take a photo of Daddy zipping his zipper. Time to take our J photo: everybody JUMP!”)



Play Together with [TinyTap](#)

[TinyTap](#) is a phenomenal app that lets you easily create simple “find and tap” games with your own images and voice.

The possibilities for games that grow with your pre-reader seem endless: use a photo of your child and ask her to touch different body parts; use an image of a simple map and ask your child to tap on the river, then the mountain; use a photo of five apples in a row and ask your child to tap the apple on the far left, then the apple on the far right, then the apple in the middle, and so on.



Lunch

Sam loves lunch! Help him catch the crunchy bugs shown below. Remember to count them correctly, or he'll grow too big and become Croc's lunch!



BEGIN

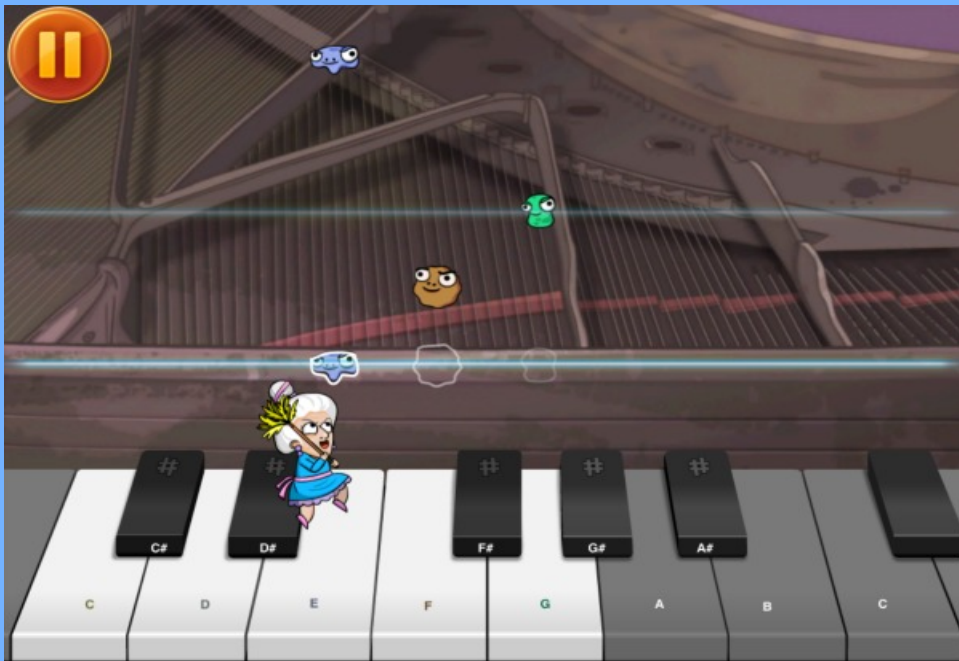
Play Together with [Sam Phibian](#)

[Sam Phibian](#) feels like a fun arcade game and bills itself as a counting game. Its true strength is as a “learning to keep track of details and pay close attention” game.

Action: help Sam catch a precise number each of red, pink, blue, and yellow bugs every meal. If you exceed a color's quota too many times, Sam grows too big to stay on his lily pad.

To start, ask your pre-reader to catch the pink and blue bugs, and volunteer to catch the (much faster) red and yellow bugs—but have your pre-reader keep track of how many of all four colors you need as you play.





Play Together with [Piano Dust Buster](#) and [Things To Spot](#)

- Swipe the mop and hit the dust mites at the right time to play a tune—all while familiarizing yourself with a piano's keyboard. 6 tunes are included in the free version, including “Mary Had a Little Lamb” and “Ode to Joy”
- Five colorful, challenging “spot it” scenes are included in [Things To Spot](#), and won't be breezed through—a solid amount of attention-focusing free gameplay.





Play Together with [Dragimals](#)

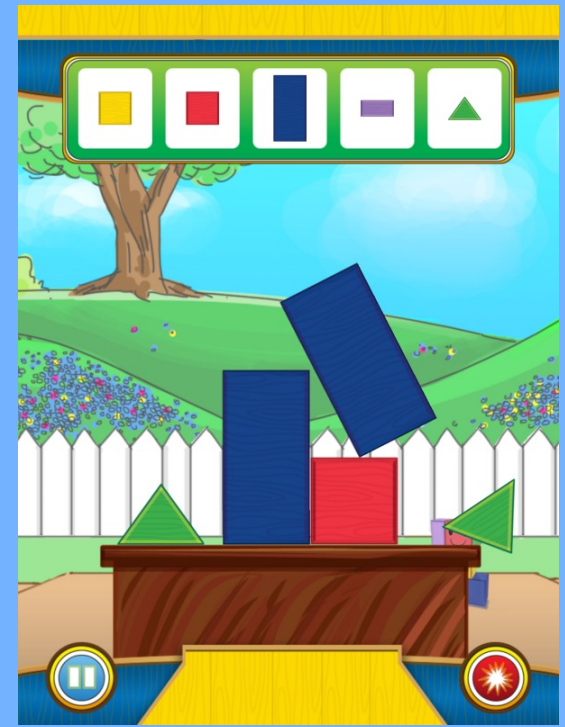
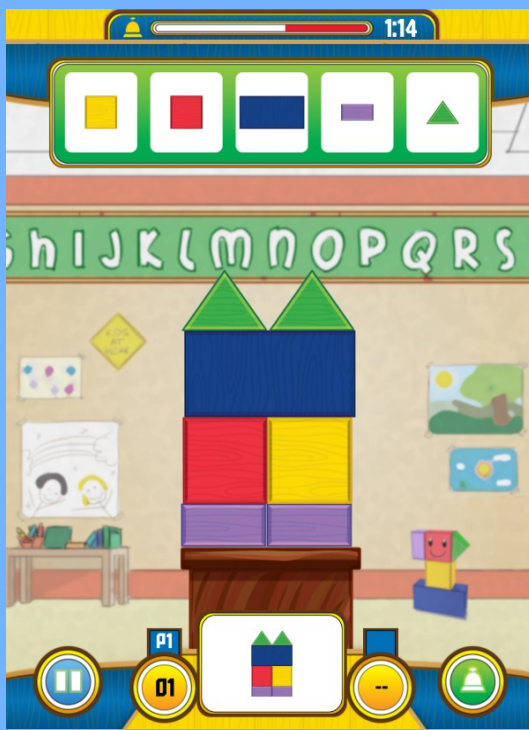
There are (at least) two ways to play with the six free sticker-like scenes (jungle, undersea, pond, farm, field, winter [NOTE: includes Christmas imagery]) in [Dragimals](#): simply pull out the stickers and place them or move them around in the scene, or hit “play” for puzzle mode and fit the stickers on top of their shadowy likenesses.

Each sticker animates in some small way when you place it: sounds, movement.



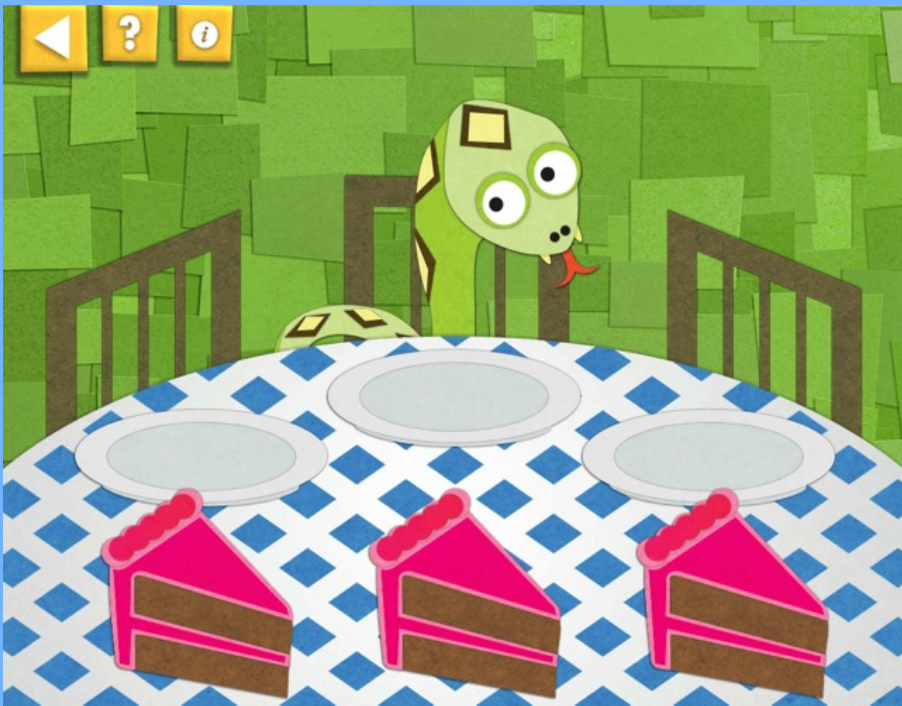
Play Together with [Find Them All](#) and [Boppi Animals](#)

- [Find Them All](#) offers great game play: find animals by scrolling through a scene; find them again in the dark with a flashlight; take pictures of them and shake the iPad to turn the pictures into puzzles—the more shakes, the more pieces.
- Who's hiding behind the curtain in [Boppi Animals](#), making it ruffle with his croak (or growl, or bark, or chirp)? A charmingly-designed animal sounds guessing game.



Play Together with [Blocks Rock!](#)

- Two modes: work to arrange the blocks to match the provided illustrations, or choose Free Play and stack blocks to your liking.
- As with physical blocks, if your tower gets too tall to support itself or your blocks aren't arranged for stability, your tower will topple!



Play Together with [PBS Parents Play & Learn](#)



- app geared to parents
- provides great tips on building your child's early literacy skills while going about your daily routine (at the park, at the grocery store, in the car, during bath time, etc)
- includes 13 mini interactive games for children ("3 and 4-yr-olds" PBS indicates) to play with their parents—not all hits, but some quite good



Sing together.

Singing draws out the sounds in words so children can hear the syllables clearly.

Sing songs while you have an app open, and sing them again together later when you're not using your tablet.



Sing Together with [Grow a Reader](#)

- From Calgary Public Library
- Geared towards parents and caregivers, with early literacy tips on writing, reading, playing, singing, and talking with pre-readers
- app includes **25** short videos of different action songs and rhymes

**INTRODUCTION TO
FINGER RHYMES**

TWO LITTLE DICKIE BIRDS

ROLY POLY

WHERE IS THUMBKIN?

TOMMY THUMBS

FIVE PLUMP PEAS

**INTRODUCTION TO
LULLABIES**

**THIS IS THE BOAT,
THE GOLDEN BOAT**

MISTER MOON

SLEEP BABY SLEEP

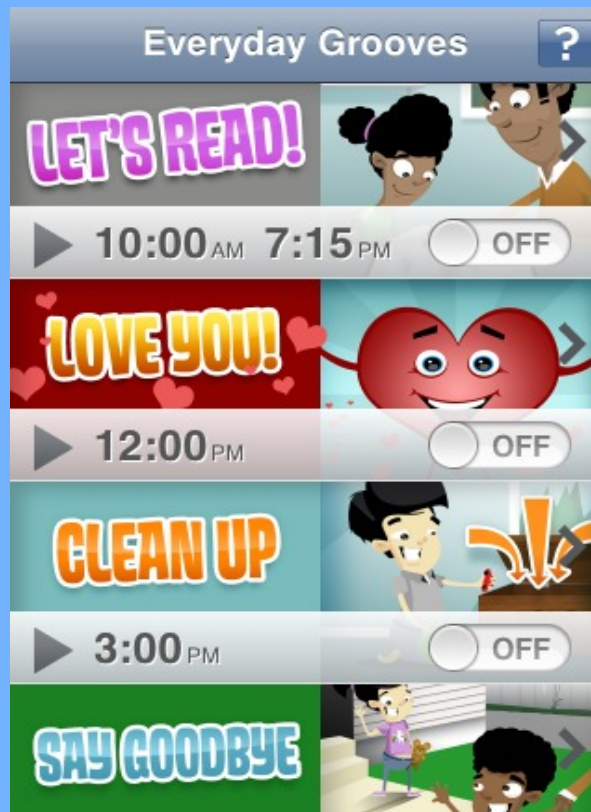
LAS LECHUZAS

BABUSHKI BAIO



Sing Together with [Little Piano Master](#)

- Includes simple, one-hand piano melodies for 24 popular children's songs
- Follow the letter prompts to play the melody yourself at your own pace and sing along, or choose "listen" to hear the melody played on the keyboard while you sing along



Sing Together with [Everyday Grooves](#)

From the [Fred Rogers Center](#), [Everyday Grooves](#) is a free album of original “daily routine” songs packed in an app that allows you to play them whenever you like, or easily use them all (or the ones you select) as alarms set to go off at a time of your choosing.

Talk together.

Talking with children builds their vocabularies, making them more likely to recognize words when they start to read.

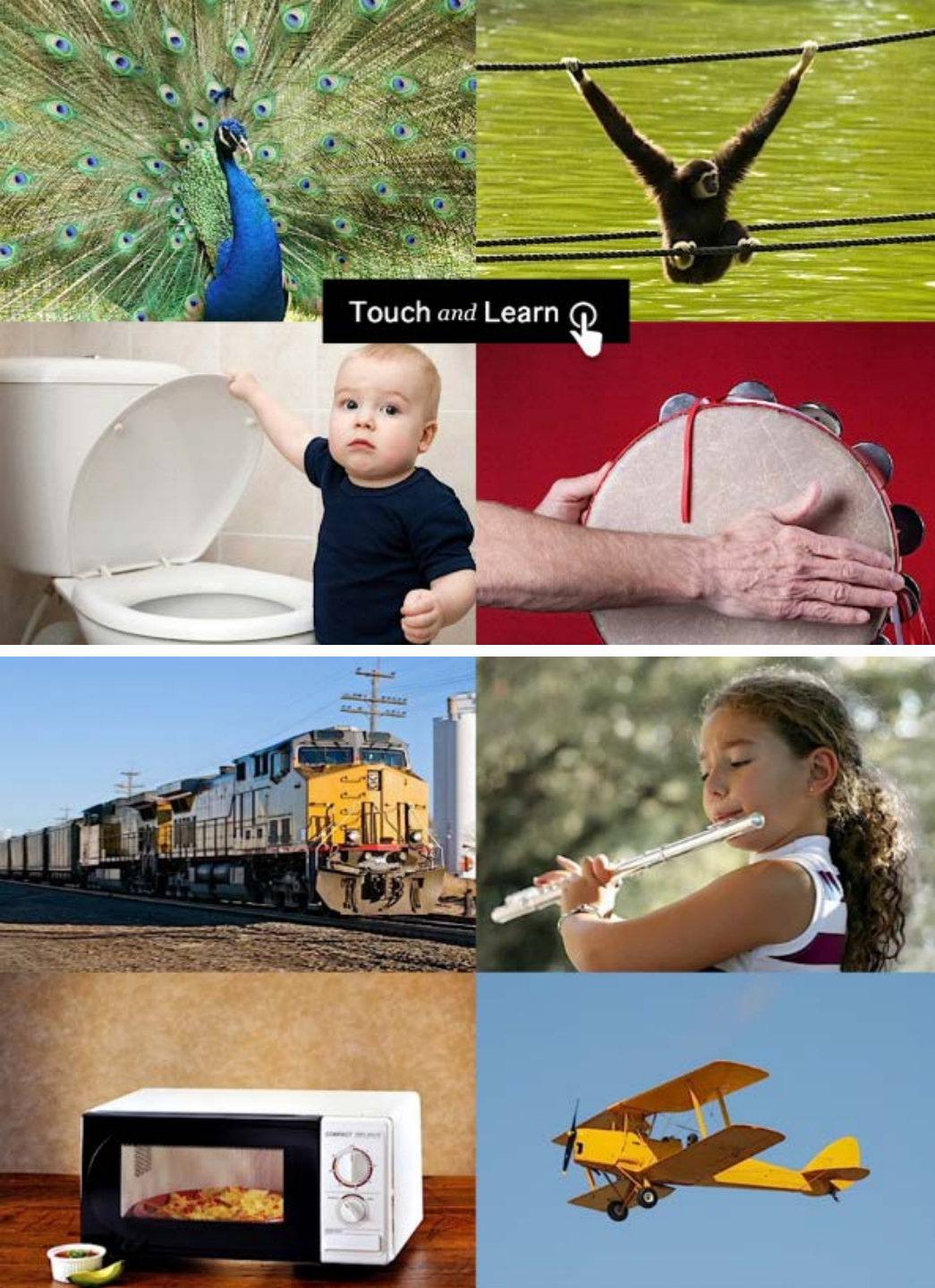
Talk back and forth (strive for five exchanges) with children as you explore apps together. Introduce new words frequently.



Talk Together with [Toca Kitchen Monsters](#)

- Action: choose a food and a tool with which to prepare it; prepare it; feed it to the monster
- Name or ask your child to name the foods, tools, and actions while you play to build vocabulary (“Should we **boil** the **broccoli** in the **pot**, or **chop** and **slice** it with the **knife**?”)
- Keep up a conversation with your child as you go (“I spy an orange vegetable in the refrigerator! Can you find it? What it’s called? Yep, it’s a carrot! How do we cook carrots at our house?”). Strive for five back-&-forth exchanges.





Talk Together with [Touch the Sound](#)

- Listen to a sound, then tap the correct corresponding photo (fully customizable: don't like an included photo or sound? Delete it in the settings section)
- Talk together about what the subjects of the “incorrect” photos sound like
- Joke and laugh together by choosing the wrong photo on purpose from time to time
- From the same publisher and in the same style, also try [Touch and Learn—Emotions](#) and [Action Words](#)



Talk Together with [Switch Zoo Free](#)

- Make your own animals together by mixing and matching animal heads, bodies, and tails
- Talk together about the characteristics (use lots of good adjectives!) of the different animals, and take conversational cues from the provided animal facts
- Play with language—make up a name for your new creature. Add invented details (what does it eat? where does it live?) or your own story about it in the provided space




Talk Together with Toddler's Seek & Find: My Little Town and Toddler's Seek & Find: My Zoo Animals

Simple, lively scenes with interactive elements to explore. No “seek & find” instructions are included, leaving it up to you to talk with your child and add meaning as you explore the scenes together.

“I spy a red flower on a window sill. Can you find it? What do you think will happen if you touch the flower? Let's find out...Which of the animals in the zoo is the biggest? Let's count all the trees in the zoo...”






Mason was looking
for buried treasure when...

Talk Together with Collins Big Cat's [In the Garden](#), [Playing](#), and [Around the World](#)

- Like [It Was a Cold, Dark Night](#), mentioned earlier, these apps are short ebooks that invite you to write your own stories using their backdrops and props—a great opportunity for conversation with your child. You can record your stories, too.
- Of these three, [Around the World](#) is the strongest as a stand-alone picture book. The “story creator” option (and backdrops and props offered) is wonderful on all three.



Help! I'm falling
out of the tree!

Basic Concepts:

sorting, patterns, recognition

The following apps are strong digital versions of activities parents and educators have been doing with children in physical space for years: sorting, pattern identification, and letter and shape recognition games.

Look at the images to find the Pattern



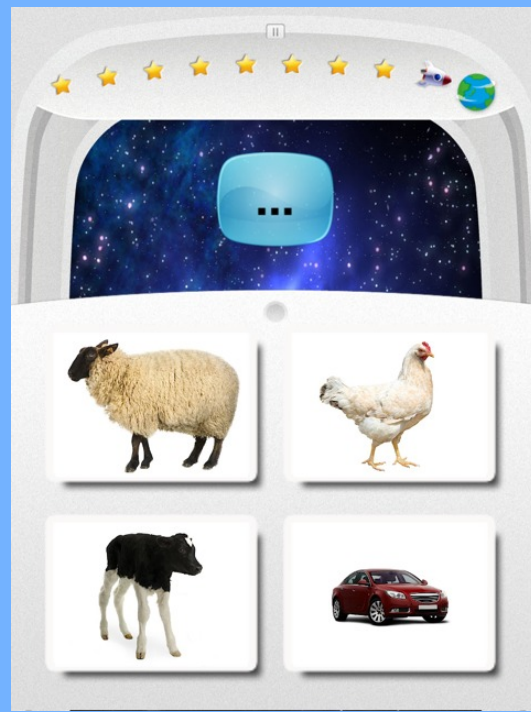
Identifying Patterns and Sorting: [Patterns by EdNinja](#), [Sort it Out 1](#), [Sort it Out 2](#), and [Sorting Educational Puzzle by TinyHands](#)

- [Patterns](#) increases in difficulty as play continues.
- Each “Sort It Out” app offers two free scenes full of objects for children to sort. Talk together about the names and characteristics of the objects as you sort them. “Sorting Educational Puzzle” offers three free scenes.



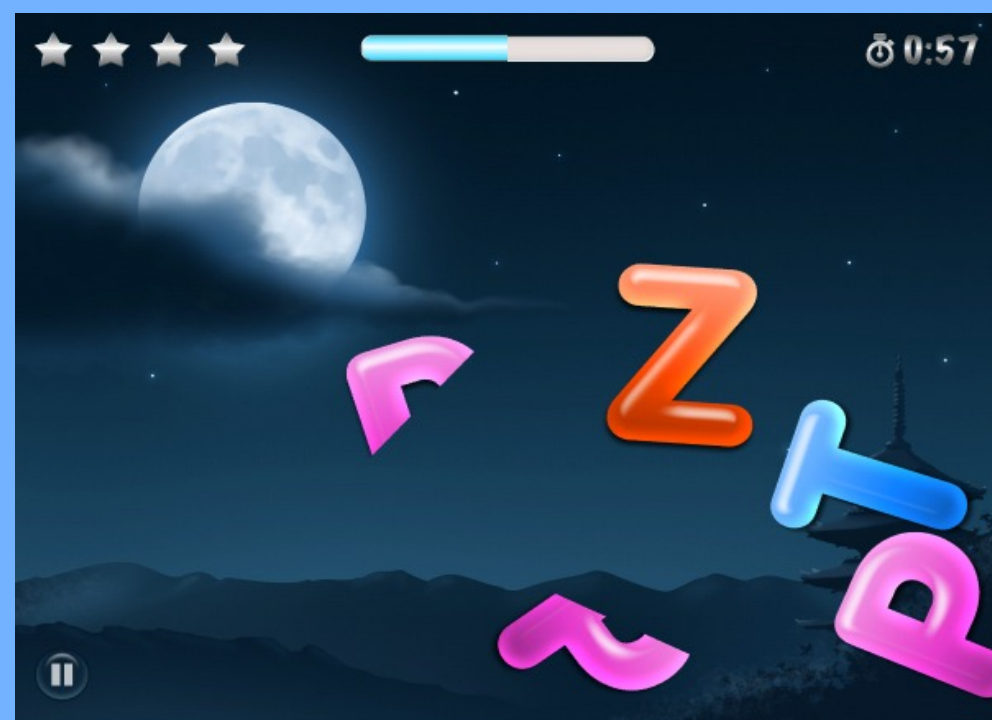
Sort it Out 1





Letter, Letter Sound, Shape (and more) Recognition: [Little Stars—Toddler Games](#)

This recognition app includes shapes, animals, colors, letters, and letter sounds. It's a great app AFTER you change the default settings: the default interrupts the game after 3 correct answers to award players a “sticker”, which is too frequent an interruption. In the settings, you can also restrict the content if you prefer (just colors and shapes, just letter recognition, etc). As your child's reading skills develop, try [Little Stars Word Wizard](#).



Letter Recognition with [ABC Ninja](#) and Advanced Sorting with [RowCol](#)

- Slice your Ps and Qs: [ABC Ninja](#) takes the concept of popular game app Fruit Ninja and adds letter and letter sound recognition elements to the mix: slice *only* through the letters whose names or sounds the narrator calls out.
- [RowCol](#) is a challenging sorting app with five levels. It gets more difficult very quickly! Each level can be played again and again—you're not forced to moved forward—and level one (shown at left) might pose all the challenge your prereader needs.





Sorting and Memory:

[Matryoshka! for kids](#), [Music Matching with Lisa Loeb](#), and [SoundMatch](#)

- [Matryoshka! for kids](#) includes four sets of nesting dolls to unpack and put back together. Make it more challenging by unpacking the dolls yourself while your child isn't watching and/or using the built-in timer to see how quickly she can reassemble them.
- There are many “memory card matching” apps out there. [Music Matching](#) is one of the nicest. Each “card” includes a short musical riff along with the image of an animal playing an instrument. [SoundMatch](#) takes the concept of adding sound to memory card matching even further, with vehicle, musical, farm, and other sounds, and the option to play without visuals.

Further Resources

- [AppySmarts](#) (reviews)
- [Best Kids Apps](#) (reviews)
- Common Sense Media's ["Best Apps: Our Recommendations for Families"](#)
- [Digital Storytime](#) (reviews, specifically of ebook apps)
- [Fred Rogers Center](#) for Early Learning and Children's Media
- [The iMums](#) (reviews)
- [Kindertown: The Educational App Store for Parents](#) (friendly search interface; includes free apps)
- [Preschool Apps](#) at [bestappsforkids.com](#) (reviews, includes "Free App Friday" feature)

Also good to know: free app [Apps Gone Free](#), which daily lists which paid apps are free for that day and regularly includes children's apps

Full List of Included Apps

Lazoo's Squiggles!
Lazoo's Let's Color!
Little Writer
Doodle Monkey
Doodle Buddy
Doodle Dandy
Finger Paint With Sounds
Hideout
The Three Little Pigs by Zubadoo
I Love Mountains
Collins Big Cat: It Was a Cold, Dark Night
Pete and the Secret of Flying HD
Just Me and My Mom
Shout Science!
The Artist Mortimer
Toca Kitchen Monsters
Patterns by EdNinja
Tap & Sing by Storybots
Alien Assignment
My A-Z
TinyTap
Sock Puppets
Sam Phibian
ABC Ninja
RowCol
Blocks Rock!

Little Stars: Toddler Games
Little Stars: Word Wizard
Sort It Out 1
Sort It Out 2
Sorting Educational Puzzle by TinyHands
Piano Dust Buster
Things To Spot
Matryoshka! for kids
Music Matching with Lisa Loeb
Dragimals
Find Them All
Boppi Animals
PBS Parents Play & Learn
Grow A Reader
Everyday Grooves
Touch The Sound
Switch Zoo
Toddler's Seek & Find: My Little Town
Toddler's Seek & Find: My Zoo Animals
Collins Big Cat: In The Garden, Playing,
And Around the World
Monkey Drums
Learn with Homer
SoundMatch by EdNinja
Little Piano Master

Have fun together.

