DIGITAL MASTERPIECES

Creative kids (read: all kids!) will love these ten apps that get them making serious art right from their smartphone or tablet.

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AT COOL MOM TECH, my partner Kristen Chase and I have spent the past six years getting to know the ins and outs of apps for kids—what works, what doesn't, what's worth spending a few bucks for, and, honestly, which apps are educational enough that we can justify our kids' screen time a little more easily. (No judgments from us—just help when you need it!) And we're here to tell you that these are exciting times: There truly have never been so many incredible digital resources for kids, especially when it comes to downloads that help with their creative pursuits.

Even better, there are many apps that can help children explore mediums they might not ordinarily find on their own. Most families don't have access to private art tutors, expensive cameras, or spendy animation camps, but the vast majority of us do have a smartphone or tablet (or both!).

That's why we've put together a list of our top creativity-building apps, each of which offers fantastic experiences for a few bucks or less. Whatever gets your kids excited, engaged, and actively pursuing their passions is great by us. And that's just what you'll find here.

music mixes
INCREDIBOX

Plenty of music schools incorporate this super-hip game, which helps mix masters create their own rhythms. That's because it's a wonderful way to get kids excited about music composition—especially when classical instruction methods might not be as appealing as the chance to DJ.

The goal is to manage a band of hipster beatboxers. Drag and drop icons onto the different characters (though we do wish at least one of them was female, ahem) to create songs from musical elements like melodies, voices, chorus, effects, and beats. When you discover certain combos, you can unlock bonus features—a trick that always gets kids exploring more.

Parents should know there is a social aspect to the app, giving kids the ability to share mixes with friends (and strangers) to earn votes. But if you've got younger children, it's just as easy to save your recording and skip the sharing. *$4, iOS; ages 4+, but ideal for ages 8+. Music Maker JAM on Google Play is a nice Android option; free, with in-app purchases.*

creating comics
FRIENDSTRIP KIDS PRO

Teachers will tell you that any genre that gets kids reading is worthwhile, and that includes comics—especially when your kid is writing, designing, and starring in it!

There are 85 templates, with stories written by comedy pros, though the text is totally customizable for your children's own original, action-packed storytelling. But the best part is that the illustrated frames are also designed to incorporate your kids' own photos—of themselves, pets, dolls, friends, you name it—bringing plenty of creative skills together. Plus you get to add Pow! stickers. Can't have a comic without a few Pow! stickers, right? *Free download for iOS, but $3 in-app purchase for all the templates; $2 on Android, with in-app purchases; ages 4+, but ideal for ages 6 to 9.*

video making
VIDEO STAR

My kids are obsessed with this super-goofy video-making app that turns 'em into the next Pharrell or Taylor Swift.

It works best if you connect it with your own song library—their licenses are fairly limited—and then it's wildly easy for kids to shoot themselves or their friends, complete with fun filters and '80s-style MTV effects. Even our kindergartners have been able to use it and then watch the results over and over. And over. And over. You'll love seeing the creativity your kids will want to put into lip-synching, choreography, performing, and editing, but a nice benefit is that Video Star also keeps kids physically active and moving.

Just be sure to limit use of the social-sharing aspect of the app. Simply save videos to the device's camera roll instead. *Free, iOS; rated 12+ for some song lyrics and social sharing, but kids 6+ can operate it with a little guidance.*

FOR ANDROID USERS

I'll be frank: You can be in a bit of a bind when it comes to the best creative apps. Developers tend to make apps for iOS first. This is partly because it's tough to design an app that offers the same functionality across so many different Android devices, each in different sizes, etc. (That's why app reviews on Google Play can be so varied.) So our list is iDevice-heavy. But we haven't forgotten you, Android parents! We've included a few terrific alternatives that your kids will love.

musical composition
SCAPE

Yes, it's pricey, but wow, this is one the whole family can get into. Created in part by Brian Eno (yes, that Brian Eno), it lets you make incredible ambient music by creating a gorgeous visual scene. Choose a background, and then assemble various shapes, textures, and colors in the foreground, with each one assigned a different musical "behavior."

Each element changes depending on what else is around it, so every single combination will result in a different landscape (or "scape") of sound. We love that there's no "right" answer or result. It's about the process. Plus, kids can use it in conjunction with the other apps here to make their own background music for audio stories or short films! *$12, iOS; ages 4+, but even toddlers may enjoy using it with your supervision.*

storytelling
SCRIBBLE PRESS CREATIVE BOOK MAKER

This is a longtime favorite creative app of ours that offers 35 Mad Libs–style story starters for people to fill in. Once the story is complete, they can select various backgrounds to overlay with their own drawings, or ready-made stickers and stamps, for a mini book all their own, ready for showing off.

A nice touch: Kids can also upload their own photos if they want to be the star of their story. Or they can record narration and turn it into an audiobook. But what we really love best is the blank-book option, allowing our tweens to create their own short story entirely from scratch. *$3, iOS and Android (find it under the name Scribble: Kids Book Maker); ages 4+, but best for kids 6 to 10.*

photography basics
HIPSTAMATIC

Now that smartphones have made photography so accessible to kids, even our toddlers are eagerly grabbing our phones to take snaps—and we love it.

But for kids who are a bit older, nothing beats Hipstamatic when it comes to the fun of exploring the details of photography. This is the original retro camera app that lets users shoot through digital versions of all kinds of camera lenses. It allows kids to learn about the impact that the various film and lens combinations can

have on their final shots. Shoot in ClassicMode to really mimic the feeling of an analog camera. Or now you can toggle to ProMode, which offers more control and gives you the ability to edit and change film and lens combos after the photo is shot. You'll be amazed at what even young children can perceive once they've trained their eyes to really look. *$3, with in-app purchases for lenses, film, and filter packs, iOS; rated ages 4+, but it's ideal for kids 7+ provided you trust them with your device!*

digital illustration
PROCREATE

Our sixth- and seventh-grade daughters are obsessive digital artists, and this painting app is a big win. It gives them remarkable power and flexibility, all with an extremely user-friendly interface. Whether your kids are into watercolor, pen-and-ink sketching, manga, or something of their own making, the control and detail that Procreate offers is mind-blowing. All for less than the cost of one good paintbrush! And it's helped one of my daughters learn more about shading, color, and texture, which she can then bring to her offline work. *$6, iPad; ages 4+ with a parent's help, kids 8+ can access more features on their own. For an Android alternative, try ArtRage; $5 on Google Play.*

DON'T FORGET A STYLUS

This is a must for kids who want to try digital illustration. Look for something manageable for small hands, with a fine tip for precision. There are plenty of affordable options, but I'm a fan of the Adonit Pro stylus. *$30; adonit.net*

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journaling
ME BY TINYBOP

From one of our favorite small developers, this storytelling app offers a modern, dynamic way for kids to preserve memories. They start by creating their own avatar, using an impressively diverse range of skin colors, hairstyles, and accessories. From there, they can choose from hundreds of questions that all invite self-reflection. Autobiographical prompts such as "this is my family" or "this is my favorite thing to do inside" get them started, and the app adds other prompts that may draw

out more emotional responses. Children can answer in the form of original drawings, clip art, and text, yielding some fantastic pages. They can even record audio or create a video journal.

We love not just the creativity the app inspires but also the memorable family discussions that can result. Very cool. *$3, iOS; ages 4+, but kids 6 to 10 will do better if using it on their own.*

animation
STOP MOTION STUDIO

Don't be fooled by the 4+ age rating on the Stop Motion Studio app; this is an incredibly powerful tool, whether your kids want to create the next Lego movie or Wallace and Gromit. It's so easy and intuitive that we recommend it for budding animators of all ages.

The step-by-step instructions make it simple for kids to learn how to shoot one still frame at a time of a character, moving it a tiny bit with each new shot. (I recommend starting with something simple such as a mini figure.) They can preview and edit as they go along, even removing frames they don't like.

The result is a stop-motion short film, made all the more professional when they use advanced features such as sound editing, paint tools, and movie-effect overlays. There's even green screen, so kids can upload existing photos into backgrounds—who wants to see Grandma fly over Manhattan?

This app is perfect for school projects, YouTube sharing, or just impressing friends and family. For a finishing touch, kids can add movie titles and credits. Don't be surprised if you overhear practice Oscar-acceptance speeches from the other room. *Free download, iOS or Android, with $5 in-app purchase for feature pack; ages 4+, but it's ideal for kids 8+.*

BONUS OPTION!

Stop-motion is so much fun, we wanted to share another fave: Edoki Academy's Easy Stop Motion Studio, which uses Colorforms-style shapes, illustrations, and templates to help kids learn the basics. *$4, iOS; ages 6 to 8*

CoolMomTech.com is an online resource for parents who want common-sense info about tech. Liz Gumbinner, who wrote this story, is the site's editor-in-chief and copublisher.