



WHEN IT'S TIME FOR "THE TALK"

Roberts shows Madeleine (5 years) and Owen (10 years) Brookes the "Facts of Life" app on her iPad. PHOTO: DIANA NETHERCOTT

Need help talking about sex with your kids? There's an app for that.

by Patty Pitts

Any parent with a computer in the house knows the warnings—keep the device in a central place, like a kitchen, so children can surf the internet under the supervision of an adult.

But when portable tablets and easy wifi access took control away from parents (despite their best efforts) and gave it to very young users, University of Victoria educational psychology and leadership professor Jillian Roberts noticed a sudden shift when working clinically with children in the community as a registered psychologist.

"About five or six years ago when tablets came in, parental control evaporated and I was having to debrief kids, young kids, on things that they'd stumbled upon on the internet," says Roberts. "Children don't understand what they're seeing. Mom and dad don't want to talk about it, but the kids have often seen inappropriate images online that are shocking for them and kids ask me if that's why their parents don't want to talk about it."

Even pre-school youngsters were viewing sexually explicit material or websites dealing

with suicide, she found. When some parents approached her, concerned about "how to have a conversation about sex with a four-year-old," Roberts decided to harness the same technology as a response.

"I'd just finished a term as associate dean," she says, "and I didn't want to write a textbook. I wanted to communicate in a fresh way." So she consulted with BC's Centre for Digital Media and worked with a team of coders to produce the application "Facts of Life" to help parents start conversations with very young kids about sex.

"It has very careful pacing, there's not too much info, it encourages questions, it's not sending parents off onto a 20-minute tangent and at any point a child can say 'that's enough,'" says Roberts about the gentle app with soft music, simple illustrations and pastel colours.

When UVic publicly announced the app last year, it immediately shot to the top of the educational download list and Roberts was covered in media such as the *New York Times* and the *Huffington Post*. "Parents like that it's not too in your face," says Roberts. "It lets families get the conversation started."

Although the success of the app exceeded Roberts' expectations, there are so many more things that she wants to do with it. "I want to add more animation, more colour and make the coding sophisticated enough to meet the team's goal of being featured on Apple's App Store," says Roberts. "I also hope it will be much more user-friendly for different countries."

She'll also use a StartSmart™ voucher from UVic's Research Partnerships and Knowledge Mobilization unit to assist with development of the next apps in the series.

Roberts, who is the mother of 13- and 11-year-old daughters and a two-and-a-half-year-old son, thinks four years old is the "ideal" age to begin a conversation with Facts of Life. "I find four-year-olds are very interested and not embarrassed to ask questions."

The very technology that she's using "has had a profound impact on our children and how they access information," she says. "We have to change the way we communicate to stay relevant and be able to educate and protect our children."

The updated version of Facts of Life is scheduled for an early 2015 release.

EDGEWISE

The Facts of Life app is available for purchase for Apple and android devices. In China the app is free and uses a simplified computer font accessible to both Mandarin and Cantonese speakers.

Roberts is developing a series of picture books for Orca Book Publishers in the same vein as the Facts of Life app. The books will cover other sensitive topics, such as death, changing families, and responding to adopted children's questions about where they came from.

Following its initial release, Facts of Life was the top educational app in Canada and several other countries, including Germany and Austria. There have been at least 35,000 downloads (and counting) at Google Play and iTunes.

For updates on Facts of Life "like" its Facebook page at bit.ly/factsoflifeapp

UVic's Research Partnerships and Knowledge Mobilization office and the Office of Research Services have worked together with the BC Innovation Council to develop a "StartSmart™ Services Voucher Program" for faculty, students and entrepreneurs at the university. The program helps new and emerging entrepreneurs create successful new ventures.

Meet Jillian Roberts at bit.ly/uvic-roberts



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