

# A review of Special iApps designed to support children with SEND - by Sarah Sutton



Sarah is Mum to Zoe, who is nearly 10 and has Down Syndrome. She was chair of Down Syndrome support group Stepping Stones DS from 2015-2019 and provides Sign Supported English training to parents and professionals through Sign in School.

We were already huge fans of the **Special iapps** range before we were given the opportunity to try out and review a couple of the more recent releases. Our daughter Zoe, who has Down Syndrome, has had an iPad, loaded with the apps, since she started school.

We credit **Special Words**, which uses a version of the match, name, select method to teach sight words, with kick-starting Zoe's reading and now at very nearly 10, she is a fantastic reader. The beauty of **Special Words**, like all the apps, is that it comes preloaded with words and images to get you started, but you can then add your own words or images as you need to teach different things. Zoe started out learning the 96 words provided with **Special Words**, which are mostly nouns, and then we adapted to extend her vocabulary and to teach topic vocabulary such as the Egyptians and most recently words related to RSE!

For this review, we were given the opportunity to try out **Special Words Pro** which provides additional features that add value in the home, therapy or education setting such as the ability to print flashcards directly from the app, externally control the app via a keyboard and print off assessment sheets. I can see this additional

functionality will massively benefit anyone trying to produce high-quality visual resources quickly and easily. Lamination still required! To read some research that demonstrated **Special Words** is an effective resource to enhance communication, language and literacy skills **check out this link**

We also got the chance to try out **Special Sentences** one of the newest apps in the range. The app provides a visual clue in the form of an image and a written sentence underlined by an appropriately sized line per word. You hear the sentence, see the sentence and then have to drag the words to the appropriate spot. As with all of the apps, you can change the difficulty through the settings to match the user's ability. I chose to have the sentence simply flashed up when it was read so that Zoe had to work on recalling the sentence, rather than matching the words. I thought this was an excellent app that could entirely be tailored to the user's needs. The sentence can be as short or complex as you wish. I particularly like the fact the punctuation is included and reinforced. I put together a series of sentences about a trip to Longleat in half term, of varying difficulty, and Zoe enjoyed working through them.

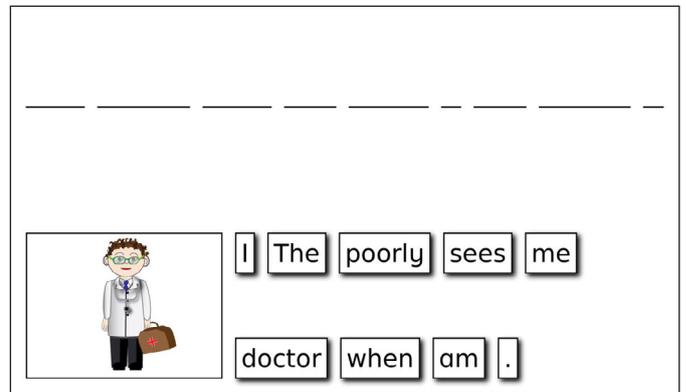
As with the other apps, you can export things that you have created between them. Transferring between **Special Sentences** and **Special Stories** is an obvious choice. **Special Stories** provides the opportunity to have an image and with text per page which is then read out, but no action is required.

Another new app to the **Specialiapps** stables is **Special Spelling**. This comes with 6 different activities: spell the word, find the first letter, find the ending, find the vowel, find the double letters and find the sound. This range of activities means that the app is about more than just spelling, it also focusses on phonic awareness. It comes preloaded with the same images and words as **Special Words** and works in a similar way to **Special Sentences** as the image and the word are displayed and then you drag letters to the right spot.

You can choose whether to have just the right letters displayed or additional ones, to increase the challenge of the task. I thought this was a great app for starting out with spelling, however, when I wanted to increase the challenge with longer words and additional letters, we found the letters got very small, which made it a struggle both visually and from a motor skill point of view. I would also have liked the option of using choosing a QWERTY style letter selection. So for me, from a purely spelling point of view, I felt there were better apps out there to meet Zoe's current need.



**Zoe loved the preloaded “people who help me” topic in Special Sentences**

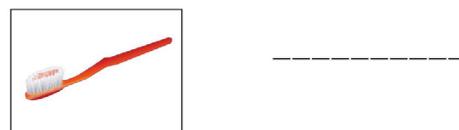


**Zoe matching words in Special Sentences**



u s h o e

**Special Spelling at its best**



h o u s e

**The challenge of increasing the complexity in special spelling**



### Zoe using Special Spelling

Finally, **Match and Find** is a wonderful app that works on supporting the development of working memory and recall using the principle of Kim's game. You can choose from: finding the same, match the pairs, where was it? what is missing? copy the order, and find the hidden pairs. You can choose to match images, words, or images to words or vice versa. By increasing the number of images in each activity, you can really increase the challenge and I thought it was fabulous for teaching memory strategies, Zoe quickly learned to repeat the pattern verbally, eg "pig horse sheep, pig horse sheep" and this helped her with a number of the games. I think this game works across a huge range, right from

teaching early matching leading into sight word reading skills, to teaching memory strategies to support working memory of longer patterns.

In conclusion the Specialapps suite really lends itself to users who are visual learners and who might benefit from the reduced motor input of a tablet by being able to drag rather than use a mouse or type. The preloaded images, words, and audible clues mean that the apps are ready to download and play but that, if you choose, you can personalise to your heart's content. This ability to add your own material, plus the ability to vary the challenge through the settings, means that these apps can support learning across a wide skill range and continue to grow with the user. They are remarkably easy to use, and have limitless possibilities as demonstrated by latest creation for Special Stories/ Special Sentences on an RSE theme which, I shall just say, starts with the image "this is a baby."

Finally, as you can export and print your creations you can share with settings and other users, making these apps really great all-rounders to support learning. Whilst the apps aren't cheap I firmly believe they are a worthwhile investment. you can share with settings and other users, making these apps really great all-rounders to support learning. Whilst the apps aren't cheap I firmly believe they are a worthwhile investment.



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