Kids and Computers

Age-appropriate educational software can help preschoolers and toddlers prepare for kindergarten by introducing shapes, colors, letters, numbers, problem solving, sequencing and ordering and creativity. Much to their parents' amazement, children seem to take to the intricacies of computer use quite naturally.

The Right Age to Introduce Computers

Some childhood researchers argue that the toddler years may be too young an age to acquaint children with personal computers (PCs). While playing with age-appropriate educational computer software has some benefits, many experts insist that reading books, participating in outdoor play and engaging in creative activities (e.g., painting and coloring) are more important to a young child's development than time spent on the computer.

However, other pediatric experts insist that the right educational software can help stimulate the imagination, introduce important language and math skills and give children valuable early experience with technology.

Despite these conflicting views, once children have learned to write with pen and paper, they can begin to use the computer to learn how to:

- Write and edit documents, making it easier to complete homework assignments
- Use e-mail to communicate quickly and easily with friends and family
- Research information with the help of encyclopedia software and the internet

Even if your child is not going to be using a computer within the first few grades of elementary school, it may not be a bad idea to at least acquaint him or her with the monitor, mouse and keyboard at a young age. Whenever you decide to introduce your child to a computer, try to do so slowly, gradually and for short periods at a time.

How will you know when your child is ready to be exposed to the computer? The best answer is to talk to your pediatrician, consult your child's preschool teacher and trust your instincts.

The Right Equipment

If you decide to expose your child to a home computer, you may want to invest in the following equipment:

- Enough memory, hard disk capacity and CPU speed to run programs now and in the near future. Most new computers are well equipped to run children's software.
- Access to the internet
- A printer
- Children's computer software
- A word-processing program
- A program that filters out Internet content that would be inappropriate for children.

Computer Tips for Young Children

In order to make computer time more enjoyable for you and your children, consider the following tips.

For toddlers:

- Put the monitor, mouse and keyboard at your child's level. If your child is younger than school age, place this equipment on a toddler table or other low surface so your child can pull up a chair easily.
- Keep the monitor 16 to 20 inches away from your child's face, and set the volume at a moderate level.
- Encourage respect for hardware and software. Teach your child how to use the mouse and keyboard properly and, with your permission, to load the software and turn the computer on and off. Insist that your child is not allowed to touch the cables or electrical cords.

Contact us anytime for confidential assistance.

- Buy software titles geared to the child's development level. If your toddler is 18 months, avoid purchasing software intended for three-year-olds. Be sure the software you buy is compatible with your computer.
- Try to use the computer together. A parent should be present to interact with the child while he or she is playing with the software. Do not let a computer become an electronic babysitter.
- Whenever possible, let your child work independently and move and click the mouse himself or herself.
- Limit use to a half an hour per day and not close to bedtime.
- Young children need freedom to move around. Encourage your child to get up and dance, clap, sing or stay active while interacting with the software.

For school-age children:

- Make it a family computer. Place the computer in an easily accessible family setting, such as in the family room or living room. By bringing the computer out in the open, you will be able to more closely monitor your child's activity.
- Set fair time limits, such as no more than an hour of computer use a day, unless it is used for homework. Consider increasing the time limit as your child gets older and needs to use the computer more for school.
- Limit your child's internet use. If your child wants to surf the Internet or send e-mail, set a rule that a parent must be present to supervise. When your child is old enough to be alone online (many experts say 12 or older), set ground rules, such as:
- Install safety filters. Many products are available that can prevent your child from accessing any adult material that is of a sexual or offensive nature.
- A home computer can open up a new world of learning and exploring for your child, but it cannot substitute for hands-on learning in the real world. Encourage your child to get involved in plenty of real-world activities, hobbies and games that can foster cognitive, motor, athletic and creative skills. Finally, make sure your child maintains proper posture while using the computer to avoid any repetitive stress injuries.

Resources

- U.S. Department of Education: www.ed.gov
- American Academy of Pediatrics: www.aap.org
- National Education Association: www.nea.org
- Federal Bureau of Investigation: www.fbi.gov

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