

# logging on

Kids and Computers

by Kevin Miles



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Our parents may think that they had it rough back when we were kids, but compared to the hurdles posed by contemporary technology, parenting our generation was a piece of cake. Think about it: our parents never had to deal with the labyrinthine uncertainties of navigating the Internet with teens or the iffy relationships between preschoolers and Leapfrog laptops. They were the lucky ones.

If you're a parent, you already know that parenting has never been more challenging. Following your parents' example or that found in any of the many market-saturating "How To" books on developing the perfect child is just not going to cut it these days.

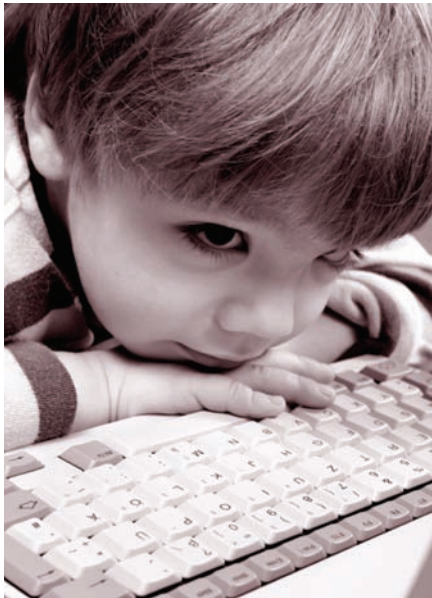
The question is: How do you determine if and when it's O.K. to expose your kids to computer technology? What are the pros and cons? Well, unless you've been living under a rock in Biosphere 1, you already know this subject has been the cause of much debate in recent years. Opinions vary and experts disagree, so in the end, as with most parenting dilemmas, it's up to you to make the final decision about how much technology is enough and how much is too much.

Some parents are introducing their kids to com-

puters as early as preschool, thanks to the dozens of sites and software programs aimed at tiny tots. Companies like KidzMouse Inc. make scaled-down versions of computer mice for small hands and Noggin.com features online games and virtual coloring books for preschoolers. Crayola, Leapfrog and Vtech make handheld video games where the focus is on combining learning and playtime to get kids excited about education.

If you're thinking that preschool kids are too young to introduce to this bold, new world of information technology, you're not alone. Some experts believe there's no real advantage to starting children so young, and some even think it can hamper your child's early development. One argument put forth is that computers detract from the creative thinking and hands-on manipulation that is essential to stimulating children's imaginations and early growth.

Author Jane Healy, an early childhood development expert, believes that the two-dimensional world of computers gets in the way of cognitive development. In her book, *Failure to Connect: How Computers Affect Our Children's Minds*, she states that computers that are used incorrectly and at too early an age can



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do more harm than good, because critical thinking skills are developed only when children manipulate objects in the three-dimensional world. Healy believes that the use of computers can become habit-forming for parents and children, thereby removing children from other more appropriate activities that are crucial to brain development and learning.

Local educators and childhood development experts are using computers in the classroom on a daily basis, so they see opposing sides of the issue. Many believe there are both positives and negatives of school-aged children being exposed to this still relatively new technology. Amber Farman, owner and director of Smart Start Preschool in Loomis, uses computers at the beginning of each class. Smart Start Preschool opened its first school in the Bay Area

in 2001, and just recently expanded to a Loomis location this past November.

“Our small class size allows for each of the 12 students in the classroom to get 10 to 15 minutes of time on the computer if they choose,” Farman says. She believes that computers are invaluable educational tools. “We use computers in the classrooms because kids learn in different ways—some visually and some by hearing. For kids that are visual learners, they see it right in front of their faces. Kids who learn better by hearing get to repeat the information, and repetition allows them to more easily grasp the content.” Farman also believes that her students develop gross motor skills as a result of manipulating the computer mouse that interacts with the software programs.

Her students are required to enter passwords before using the computer, and Internet use is closely monitored. “The kids are only allowed to visit [www.pbskids.org](http://www.pbskids.org), and a school employee always watches over them to ensure that they only visit that site. We don’t want them roaming the Internet. They use the computer for art, math and educational games.” She says that her students, who range from two to seven years old, pick up computer skills very quickly, and learn words and language skills rapidly as well. “Our two-year-olds seem to learn shapes and colors very quickly because of their exposure to learning programs on the computer,” she says. “Obviously, we don’t want the kids on the computer all morning because there is so much material to cover, but we think it’s important that they get some time on the computer.”

Farman does emphasize that there are negatives associated with computer use that she’s personally experienced. “Sometimes kids can tune out others, like when you’re trying to talk with them or get their attention. Just like with TV, they get completely focused on the screen. So, that’s probably a negative,” she notes.

Jeff Palmrose, a Computer Applications and Multimedia teacher at Sutter Middle School in Folsom, also sees the pros and cons of having computers in the classroom. With an average of 35 sixth, seventh and eighth graders in each of his classes and the luxury of having one computer to each student, he is able to see both sides of the argument. “I’m all for using com-

puters in the classroom, but I guess I’m sort of biased. I think it’s the way to go. My class is mostly paperless, so we’re not using a lot of funds for paper products. Students turn in their work electronically and I grade on a laptop or in my classroom,” he says.

Palmrose believes that the educational advantages that students receive from exposure to computers are undeniable. “The obvious benefit is more experience in using technology. They’re the generation of which 90 percent will be involved in careers where computers will be used one way or the other. This way, we’re preparing them for experiences outside the classroom.” As far as the controversy that surrounds the issue of computer use in the classroom, Palmrose strongly disagrees with detractors that claim they do more harm than good. “I’m trying to incorporate practical applications for my students, for problem-solving skills and higher level critical thinking skills. I think the people who make negative statements about kids and technology are just looking at the computers for their “kill and drill” use—the “read and respond” or the keyboarding applications. And yes, those are taking away from what could be time spent manipulating items in a three-dimensional world—but I don’t see it that way because I don’t teach that way.”

Still, like Farman, Palmrose admits that there are some definite disadvantages to overuse of computer technology in an educational setting. “Because I have one computer to each student, it’s easy for the kids to not interact with each other. That is something that I work on. We actually do group projects where the students have a partner, or they work in groups of three or four. They have to plan together and talk to each other. They do have to interact, because it’s too easy to get lost behind the monitor and just bury your head in your keyboard and plug away at your program.”

Palmrose is determined to make sure his students use technology as a way to develop better social interaction, teaching them the importance of teamwork, interpersonal communication and group dynamics.

“I think it’s important that, as a teacher, I make a conscious effort to get the students interacting, so they’re not stuck in the “I’m by myself” mode. I’m afraid that one of the drawbacks of technology is that we’re not going to be able

to avoid the disconnection that results from increased use of technology. We're used to using Myspace to talk to our friends and not actually going to visit them across the street or calling them on the phone. There are pros and cons to every technology advance, so you have to find a balance."

A recent survey by the Kaiser Family Foundation revealed that 31 percent of children age three and under are already using computers. Sixteen percent use computers several times a week, 21 percent can use a mouse on their own and 11 percent can turn the family computer on and off without Mom and Dad's help.

Healy believes that kids shouldn't touch a computer until they're at least seven. Others think children as early as three can benefit from exposure to computer technology and the Internet. The American Academy of Pediatrics strongly recommends that parents keep infants away from computers before the age of two.

Many experts, researchers and Web site and software developers believe just as strongly that there's nothing wrong with exposing kids at an early age, as long as it's done under adult supervision and in moderation.

Peter Greenwald of Grunwald Associates, one of the world's most respected market research and strategic consulting firms in the areas of technology, children, families and education, believes that computers can be valuable learning tools at home and in classrooms. His firm has conducted a series of surveys about the use of computer technology at home and school since the 1990s. He errs on the side of the positive benefits of children interacting with computers, and believes they can help develop hand-eye coordination and other skills that are valuable to learning and cognitive development.

The one thing on which most people agree is that more research is needed to assess the long-term effect that computers, the Internet and other high tech products and services have on our children.

This much is certain. Your kids, from an early age, have access to an incredible amount of information and technology. Whether or not early and continued access to this is beneficial is still up for debate, but the fact that it is "out there" should make us inquisitive enough to pursue a more definitive answer. ●

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