

Two fairly recent newspaper articles that discuss when children should begin using computers.

Tots ready for computers? Experts fear development could be at risk:[All Edition]

Milwaukee Journal Sentinel. Milwaukee, Wis.:Aug 3, 2004. p. 4E

Copyright 2004 Journal Sentinel Inc. (Note: This notice does not apply to those news items already copyrighted and received through wire services or other media)

Tots ready for computers?

Experts fear development could be at risk

Associated Press

Tuesday, August 3, 2004

Amanda Cunningham started her daughter on computers at age 2 1/2 with "Reader Rabbit" software and Web sites such as Sesame Street. Like any parent, she was proud Madeline could master the mouse so young.

But Cunningham, of New York, soon realized Madeline, now 4, wasn't really learning anything. She just kept clicking, dragging and playing the same games over and over. Now, she's in no rush to get her 1-year-old son, Liam, on computers or the Internet.

"I just don't see an advantage (to) starting early," said Cunningham, a former teacher who now creates reading software for elementary schools.

There is no shortage of sites and software aimed at very young children and even toddlers. Noggin.com has games and virtual coloring books for preschoolers. A Crayola licensee makes hand-held video games, including one where kids race in a crayon-shaped car, for 3 and up. KidzMouse Inc. makes computer mice for small hands.

But there is growing debate over whether children should be exposed to technology so early. Some parents and scholars see no benefit, and a handful even warn of a hindrance to child development.

"Mental ability is gained from manipulating the three- dimensional world at that age and (from) managing your own mind and not having it managed by an electronic machine," said Jane M. Healy, author of "Failure to Connect: How Computers Affect Our Children's Mind."

Healy said computers take children away from other developmental activities more appropriate for their brains and can "easily become a habit for both parent and child."

According to a 2003 survey by the Kaiser Family Foundation, 31% of children age 3 and younger are already using computers. Sixteen percent use them several times a week, 21% can point and click with a mouse by themselves and 11% can turn on the computer without help.

Healy recommends kids stay off computers until age 7. Others suggest 3 is OK to start. The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends no screen time before 2, worried youngsters may get discouraged if they talk to a computer monitor and get no response.

David Elkind, professor of child development at Tufts University, is concerned that children are overdeveloping visual senses at the expense of touch or sound.

"Children miss out on all these basic learning experiences if they are so attuned to the virtual world," he said.

Yet some researchers as well as developers of the Web sites and software aimed at young kids see nothing wrong with exposing children to technology early -- as long as it's done in moderation.

"Kids need a good balance in their lives and a mix of experiences," said Peter Grunwald, whose consulting firm specializes in kids and technology.

Through common sense use, Grunwald said, computers can help kids develop hand-eye coordination and other skills.

Yong Zhao, a professor of educational psychology at Michigan State University, bought his daughter an iMac before she turned 1 and had her simply bang on the keyboard. Eventually, he said, his daughter picked up on how the banging led to changes on-screen.

Young kids should be supervised while surfing the Web anyhow, so early Internet use offers a chance for "spending time with your kids and seeing what they react to," said Regina Lewis, consumer adviser for America Online, which has "KOL Jr." section for ages 2 to 5.

Developers of the kids site Googles.com -- not to be confused with the search engine -- say their games and songs promote self-esteem. Scholastic says its Clifford products teach reading and music -- not to mention computing.

Others say they can't possibly quell their children's curiosity for a machine their parents -- and older siblings -- are using so much.

"The same way that every little kid who's starting to walk goes into the kitchen and takes pans out of the cabinet, they see their parents doing things and they want to do them, too," said Jim Robinson, an advertising executive who created KneeBouncers.com initially for his then-9-month-old daughter.

The site -- one of a number of so-called lapware for toddlers to toy with on parents' laps -- has Flash-animated games with lots of noise and bright colors. Robinson said he gets e-mail of thanks from parents of children as young as 5 months old.

Beyond the home, computers are increasingly creeping into day care and preschool environments, in turn pressuring parents to get computers as soon as their child is born, said Peggy Meszaros, director of Virginia Tech's Center for Information Technology Impacts on Children, Youth and Families.

"Parents today are so obsessed with giving children every academic advantage, they've been persuaded that if they wait a minute to introduce children to computers and technology, that somehow their children will be behind," she said.

But if those same parents talked to teachers, they'd learn that kids pick up keyboarding and mouse skills easily even if they wait, said Patricia Cantor, chairwoman of Plymouth State University's education department.

More research is needed, proponents and skeptics agree.

"What's happening is the market is proceeding at a faster pace than the research," said Kathryn Montgomery, a communications professor at American University. "It's taken awhile for the academics to reach a point where they are addressing these questions. The marketers, they were clearly on the case 10 years ago."

Credit: Associated Press

Argument against high-tech toddlers Computers: An educational psychologist denounces the trend toward a technology 'jump-start' for young children.: [FINAL Edition]

Mike Bowler. The Sun. Baltimore, Md.:Feb 25, 2001. p. 2B

(Copyright 2001 @ The Baltimore Sun Company)

A CHILD'S MIND is a terrible thing to waste on computers.

Or so Jane Healy believes. Healy is an educational psychologist who believes it's not only useless but damaging to put computers in the hands of children younger than age 7 - at home or in school. And she says most of the software intended for kids just learning to read is unproven "junk" marketed by people "who have no idea how children learn."

Healy was in town Thursday, carrying her message to Jemicy, the school for dyslexic children in Owings Mills. More than 300 people had signed up to hear her evening lecture, wiped out by the storm. But Healy spent the afternoon talking with Jemicy pupils and faculty.

The interesting thing about Healy is that she's not a technology Luddite who would take up sledgehammer against all computers. "I love technology," says the veteran teacher, principal, college professor and reading specialist. "I was involved in thinking about and watching the development of children using computers long before it was widely accepted."

But what she resists passionately is the current craze to "jump-start" toddlers and very young children on computers. "The human brain does not want to be jump-started," she says, "and the people who are making these products are telling parents that their kids are worthless if they're not jump-started. It's ridiculous."

Healy, whose latest of four books is "Failure to Connect: How Computers Affect Our Children's Minds - and What We Can Do About It," says she believes that computer instruction might help young children internalize the sounds of foreign languages and that technology might be useful in teaching those with specific disorders, such as cerebral palsy.

But with those exceptions, she argues, computer use by the very young "is potentially damaging because it's taking from children the things they should be doing at those ages." That includes having human contact, learning the rudiments of language and "just learning who you are. You learn these things through three-dimensional experiences, not one-dimensional experiences that are someone else's idea of what you should know.

"Besides, most software for children doesn't require them to listen to anything. They just sit and look."

That, of course, has been the chief complaint about television for a half-century. Computers and TV detract from a child's "ideation," says Healy. "Ideation is the ability to create a vision that's mentally tangible without anything else. Good readers are good ideators."

An art teacher recently told her, Healy says, that some of her students could not draw a horse without first being shown a picture of one. "Some kids are so immersed in visual media that they can't form images in their minds. It's sad."

With a storm howling outside, Healy spent an hour in the school gym with Jemicy's middle school pupils. The human brain may have 100 billion cells, known as neurons, she explained, "and the more stuff you think about, the more these little critters grow, and the smarter you get."

Healy broke the crowd into groups of four and five (including teachers), asked each to consider what the computer can do that the human brain can't, and vice versa, then asked them to reach a consensus on whether computers will ever be as smart as their human creators. Each small group was to report back to the larger group.

Some of the results were funny, some insightful:

"The computer can't do enjoyable things like going to the beach and playing football."

"The computer doesn't have the emotions and stuff, but if we could be hooked up to one and have the knowledge of the computer along with the emotions, that would be good." (Healy told the pupils that some very deep thinkers are thinking along those same lines.)

"Computers do not have instinct. It doesn't come naturally to them."

"Humans can be lonely."

"No, computers won't be as smart. People can think on our own. We have to tell computers what to do."

"We can imagine stuff, you know. I can imagine Nick in a spacesuit. Do you think a computer could do that?"

"It's possible computers could be smarter. If we don't use the brains we've got, computers could get smarter because we rely on them too much."

This last was music to Healy's ears. "Your brain grew today whether you wanted it to or not," she said.

Credit: SUN STAFF