Kids & Computers

Tips to Help Children Make the Best Use of their Time on the Computer

By Connie Brennan
Owner/Director of Computertots and
Computer Explorers

We think of today's young computer users as "naturally digital," but children are children, requiring healthy boundaries, coaching and encouragement. Used appropriately, the computer represents a vehicle for children to learn, create and express themselves, achieving independence in such pursuits at increasingly younger ages.

Computertots neither recommends nor encourages children under the age of 3 to engage in formalized computer lessons or usage. Despite the recent development and sale of software ("lapware") for children under age 3, we find that before this age, children generally do not possess sufficient cognitive skills or attention span to have a positive and therefore successful first experience with the computer. We recognize that there may be some very developed toddlers out there under the age of 3, but their parents are in the best position to make this judgment.

For children aged 3:

Gently place your hand over your child's, or guide the mouse tail, to assist him/her in maneuvering and navigating it. Be patient in allowing your child to use the mouse. We find that most children will gain mastery over the use of the mouse within a few short sessions. We encourage even "lefties" to use the right hand and to click with the right forefinger. However, if your child experiences difficulty or shows sign of frustration, the mouse settings can be changed to adapt to left-hand use.
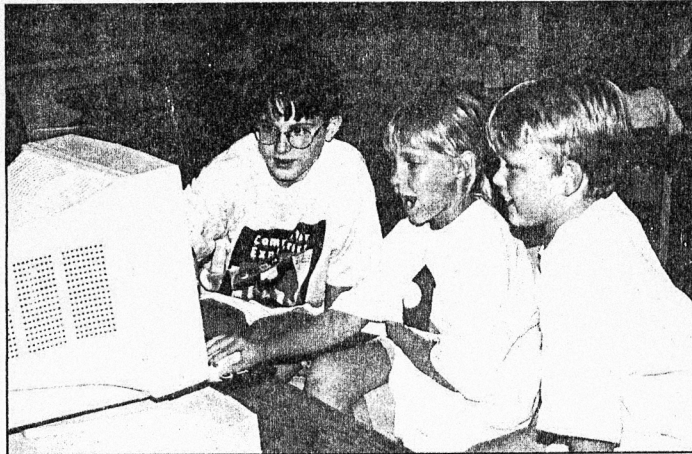
Keep your computing sessions short. Fifteen to 30 minutes is plenty at this age.

Avoid drill and practice software. Today's software is practically devoid of this type, but keep an eye out, nonetheless. Computing should be engaging and fun. ActiMate interactive dolls such as Arthur, DW and Barney take the experience to another level by providing a nurturing playmate who interacts "magically" (via radio transmitter) with certain software titles which are strong in content for toddlers.

Use software with "hot spots" to help practice mouse manipulation. A hot spot is an area within the software which is usually highlighted, and when clicked, makes something happen. Help your youngster to identify hot spots and share in the surprising moments that result. Humongous Entertainment's Putt-Putt series has fabulous active discovery titles.

Make something! You can creatively help your child develop skills such as classifying objects and learning shapes and colors by assisting him/her to select objects in a clip art, stamp and/or draw program and create a masterpiece.

Introduce your child to the internet. There are many good sites for exploring interactive stories, games and adventures with your young child.

Computer Explorers at St. Peter's summer camp dive into real life expeditions and meet scientists at work in the field as they climb mountains and set sail round the globe.

For children aged 4 and 5:

Allow your child to participate in the rituals of operating the computer: powering it up, identifying where to find files and programs, and providing rules for quitting a session.

We teach children to load CDs by inserting a finger through the "hole of the donut" and carefully placing it in the drive.

Again, avoid drill and practice software. Choose titles that provide developmentally appropriate material set forth in a creative way. Your child will love his/her learning experience if it is dynamic and fun. Disney's learning series offers engaging titles to build pre-reading and math skills.

Set time limits. Your child's empowering experience will be diminished if he/she gets tired and frustrated. If need be, set a time that limits your child's computing session to 30-45 minutes.

Try playing the name game. Your child will delight in seeing his/her name in a variety of styles and sizes on the computer screen with a few of your simple keystrokes.

Let your child connect to friends or loved ones by choosing and sending an e-mail greeting card using one of many free services available online.

Take advantage of your child's unending curiosity by exploring resources such as encyclopedia software. From classical music with images to exotic wildlife, you and your child can share an enriching experience. Knowledge builds confidence.

Travel the internet together: visit the various websites designed just for children including the children's activity page at www.computertots.com.

For children 6 and 7:

Let your child practice basic computer operation procedures at the start-up and close of each computing session. Good habits start young.

Reinforce everyday literacies by selecting software that builds reading skills, problem-solving and creative expression.

Make something! Using Disney's Print Studio's A Bug's Life or Microsoft's Picture It! '99 along with its digital camera, Jam Cam, your child can enjoy hours of creative fun!

Build your child's mental muscles by doing math and science puzzles online. Activities Integrating Mathematics and Science (AIMS) offers engaging puzzles and mind games by going to www.aimsedu.org/aimskids/izone .

Set your timer for one hour to help make each of your child's computing experiences positive.

For children 8 and up

Help your child to make the computer work for him/her. From online homework help and using a CD-ROM encyclopedia to creating a book report on a word processor, your child can reap the benefits of your home computer.

Connect your youngster to his/her cause of interest by going online. The National Wildlife Federation offers an array of great information, activities and volunteer opportunities in a section for kids at www.nwf.org .

Dive into real life expeditions and meet scientists at work in the field as explorers/researchers climb mountains or set sail around the globe by going to www.adventureonline.com . Encourage your child to keep a journal. Your child can practice keyboarding skills and build his/her creative writing talents.

For fun and games, try Madlibs. Enter approximately 15 words in categories such as verbs, adjectives and nouns. Create your own funny Madlibs at www.mit.edu/storyfun . Use a net nanny or set the parental controls on your internet service provider to protect your child from objectionable material online. Set rules for sending and receiving e-mail correspondence.

Remember to take a 10-minute break every hour you work on the computer. Your eyes and other body parts will need the rest.