



by Karen Stephens

Computer Use and Internet Safety for Preschoolers

Early childhood educators are quick to warn that preschool children shouldn't spend too much daily time at computers or viewing web sites. And as of 2007, consensus seems to be that regular computer play is only recommended for ages three years and up, though some computer programs are made for children younger.

Preschoolers benefit from well-designed software programs targeted to the age group's unique developmental needs, skills, and learning styles. However, computer play should never replace children's more complex, interactive experiences with materials and peers. Prolonged sedentary activity should also be avoided so children are active for better physical and mental health.

A preschooler shouldn't be sitting at a computer more than about 30 minutes daily. For most children, their time is best split between two engaging sessions.

Software programs should reinforce learning concepts preschoolers encounter in other types of play, such as block building, coloring, working with puzzles, or running outside. Good software helps children learn to follow directions, make decisions, problem solve, match and sort, as well as recognize letters, shapes, and numbers. When programs allow for two or more players, verbal language and social skills develop, such as sharing ideas, taking turns, cooperating and encouraging each other's progress.

If you decide to offer computer experiences, the desks and chairs children use should be proportioned to their size and be in a well-lit area. Strain on children's necks, backs, legs, or eyes should be prevented. After that, you're ready to move on to selection decisions.

Selecting Appropriate Software for Preschoolers

There are accepted criteria for distinguishing good preschool software. Trust independent reviews that include input from educators who have seen children actually use the programs. Listed below are basic quality indicators for children's software:

- content is non-biased, non-violent, and reinforces values acceptable to your family
- graphics are dynamic, animated, and respond quickly
- program is managed mainly with a mouse and is easy to use by way of spoken instructions, understandable pictures, and symbols or icons rather than requiring reading
- topics, concepts, and game goals are interesting to children and content is worth learning
- exploring is encouraged through open-ended activities, such as drawing or making sound effects or color choices
- children receive regular positive feedback (through graphics or sounds) and program hints for successful mastery
- adaptable, self-paced play with ample decision-making opportunities are built into program design

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- program options are educational, entertaining, and can expand with children's emerging concept and skill development.

For a more thorough discussion on how to evaluate, select, and use preschool software, I recommend the monthly electronic publication "Children's Technology Review" at www.childrensoftware.com.

The book *Young Kids and Computers: A Parent's Survival Guide* by W. Buckleitner, A. Orr, and E. Wolock (Flemington, NJ: Children's Software Review, 1998) is also a great resource. It gives a bevy of tips for helping children successfully use computers at home, including how to clean the computer!

Surfing the Web with Preschoolers

Preschoolers shouldn't access web sites independently, but they enjoy viewing sites with parents or siblings. Often it's to learn of current events or view vacation sites. I've even had children dictate e-mail messages to send their parents.

There are many web sites geared to kids. To find them, the most frequently recommended children's web site search engines are "Yahooligans!" and "Ask Jeeves for Kids." You can also explore "LittleClickers" at www.childrensoftware.com.

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Ensuring Internet Safety

When children go online, it's like welcoming the world into your door. And there are some visitors you don't want. That's why filtered search engines are important. And preschoolers should never be alone web surfing — a lot pops up out there kids shouldn't see.

However, preschoolers are known to view web sites with older siblings, so tips on Internet safety should be shared with all. Listed below are some basic rules for kids' Internet use. Children should:

- never give out personal information such as name, address, password
- never agree to meet anyone they've met on the web, or invite them to your home
- never lie and tell someone on the web they are older than they are
- never use a parent's credit card to attempt to purchase an item
- never keep secrets from parents if a scary, violent, vulgar, or sexual message or photo appears on the web — they should tell parents immediately.

In the spirit of full disclosure, there are some professionals who have more reservations about preschoolers' computer software use than I. If you'd like to investigate those concerns, you'll want to read *Failure to Connect: How Computers Affect Our Children's Minds — for Better and Worse* by Jane Healy (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1998). Food for thought from both sides of an issue is never a bad idea.

One thing is sure; in some way, computers will be a part of your child's life. Parents can play a key role in making sure a child's introduction to computer experiences is well-balanced and make a positive impact.

About the Author — Karen Stephens is director of Illinois State University Child Care Center and instructor in child development for the ISU Family and Consumer Sciences Department. For nine years she wrote a weekly parenting column in her local newspaper. Karen has authored early care and education books and is a frequent contributor to *Exchange*.

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