

Surfing with Your Baby

By Cynthia Howe



*Jack Ratliff practices his letters
photo by Chris Fritchie*

A MOTHER SNUGGLES her baby in close, softly humming a sweet lullaby under her breath, kisses the top of his fuzzy head and then starts to surf the net. No, she's not looking for a homemade baby food recipe, she's looking for an educational program for her baby. The picture may seem strange, but not for a growing number of parents who are asking the question, "how young is too young" when it comes to sitting down in front of a computer in hopes of gaining an educational edge?

The conflicting voices of experts clash over how much, if any exposure should children under the age of five have to the computer. Most educators agree there are certain benefits for children aged four or five, but what about children under the age of two? What about an infant? Too young you may say, but software developers have successfully pushed their market to include infants as young as six months.

The market for software designed for children under the age of five is well over \$50 million a year and accounts for approximately 13% of educational software sales. A large portion of this

market stems from software developers who have created a niche called "lapware." These programs are intended for adults to use with babies as young as six months to two years as the child sits on the parent's lap. With the growth of this segment of the software industry, many software developers, child psychologists and educators have joined the fray over how young is too young and what the benefits may or may not be.

Do not confine your children to your own learning for they were born in another time.

Hebrew Proverb

For example, some child advocates disagree with the trend saying that what kids really need is lots of time in nature, face-to-face conversations with those around them, time to sit on a parent's lap and listen or tell stories. They say the

computer is beginning to replace hands-on activities and time spent actually creating something.

In contrast, the National Association for the Education of Young Children states that computers are intrinsically motivating for young children, and that they contribute to cognitive and social development. Computers can strengthen problem-solving skills, increase hand-eye coordination and stimulate external awareness on a variety of levels. For example, they say, lapware stimulates the development of cause-and-affect thinking for infants and there is a marked educational advantage for special education children who utilize a variety of appropriate computer programs. The division between the experts has left some parents skeptical and bewildered, while others have learned to incorporate appropriate levels of computer time into their child's repertoire of activities.

To surf or not to surf with your baby, that is the question, but as any sage parent has discovered, a young child's mind will explore in its own fascinating way. I taught my oldest son to read before kindergarten. It wasn't because

I wanted him to have an educational edge, but because he wanted to know how those symbols were words that communicated, “Oh No, Mr. Rabbit!” It was his world and we were captivated by it ourselves.

Computers are a part of our social structure, and since babies and toddlers haven’t changed much throughout history, they are going to be drawn to whatever draws us. So along with park time, Lego time, nap time, cooking time and reading time, it’s fine to fit in a few moments of computer time if they’ve shown an interest. After all, it’s only natural for them to want to explore that thing that mom and dad spend so much time with. Let them; just help them do it in a balanced way.

Many mothers of preschoolers attest to the value of online learning for their little ones. Leah Ratliff of Plano says of her 20-month-old son Jack, “He knows all of the alphabet letters and their sounds. The other day we were at a stop light next to a school bus and out of nowhere he said, “sssss-tuh-ah-puh.” He sounded out the word “stop” from the side of the bus! That doesn’t happen everyday, but it’s a start.”

While our sons were not yet preschoolers, we would go to the library every week for story time, and afterwards we would check out a couple of computer programs. I have fond memories of them following the story of “Me and My Dad,” or learning their letters with “Arthur.” It was another cost-effective way of exposing them to a variety of age-appropriate software that held their interest. A new trend

toward online software provides the same benefits. But before you explore, prepare.

A computer is a costly investment, so protecting it is important. Fisher Price

relationship between cause and affect.

KNEEBOUNCERS.COM

This website has a great collection of online lapware with games and activities to stimulate your baby or toddler as they explore. There are bubbles to pop, trains to watch, even a great game of peek-a-boo. The graphics are simple and entertaining without being over-stimulating.



Clockwise from top left: www.juliasrainbowcorner.com, www.kneebouncers.com, www.sesamestreet.org and www.starfall.com

makes a great keyboard for babies and preschoolers. **The Computer Cool School** keyboard hooks up to your computer and provides for the needs of the child as well as offering parental peace of mind. An added consideration may be a mouse developed for little hands. Once you have considered the gear, prepare to share a new world with your child. Here are a few sites worth exploring:

HOLYMACKERELSOFTWARE.COM

The favorite lapware among many, “KeyWack” is found on this site. Download the program here and let your baby whack away at your keyboard. While the program prevents babies from accidentally opening or deleting your files, it also gives them the giggles as they bang on the keyboard, conjuring shapes, colors and random sounds onto the screen. The interaction helps build the

teach toddlers the relationship between the mouse and the screen. Wherever the child clicks on the screen the ball rolls to that spot. One of the most beneficial aspects found on this site is a section geared toward autistic children. Professionals agree that computer use by children with autism is highly effective and recommended.

FISHER-PRICE.COM

From a company that knows little ones quite well comes a website with a number of games for infants, toddlers and preschoolers. Choose from programs such as “Peek a Boo,” “Tap and Color” and “The ABC’s Zoo.” The programs are fun for babies who enjoy banging on keys and seeing reactions that are fascinating to them. The learning programs for toddlers are geared for fun, while not being too complicated;



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the programs aimed at preschoolers are ideal for learning phonics, music appreciation, numbers and more.

SESAMESTREET.ORG

Very friendly for children and parents alike, this site is filled with characters your children will recognize from the venerable television show. In one online game, children learning to count are rewarded by Elmo doing a chicken dance. Another activity is geared toward infants who tickle Elmo when they hit any key. Big Bird, Oscar and Ernie are all there to help your child learn the alphabet, count and identify colors and shapes. In addition to games designed to increase music and art appreciation, this site also exposes children to a bit of Spanish. Bueno!

STARFALL.COM

This site is perfect simplicity for toddlers and preschool age children. With a number of age-appropriate programs geared towards learning, children will finish simple tasks as they are exposed to numbers, letters, colors and shapes.

JULIASRAINBOWCORNER.COM/ HTML/FUNANDGAMES.HTML

This website provides great learning opportunities for a variety of preschool stages. There are a number of simple programs with a terrific balance of graphics and sounds that teach, among other things, counting, numbers and letter recognition. Appropriate for ages six months and up.

INTERNET4CLASSROOMS.COM /PREK.HTM

This is the mother-lode list of educational programs for preschoolers. There are a few that could be considered lapware, such as “Flower Garden” and “Baby Rose’s Eyes,” but the list goes on and on

with programs for children up to the age of eight. With programs that range from simple to complex, this is a terrific resource to bookmark.

Many parents agree that utilizing online programs is cost-effective and meets the ever-changing interests of the child. For example, G I G G L E S software is sold online and is quite popular for babies age 6 to 36 months. Another way of controlling spending on a software search is to look at your local library. Reader Rabbit Toddler, by The Learning Company, or Freddi Fish programs by Humongous Entertainment

remain a favorite among parents as well as children. Programs such as these should be readily available at your local library.

With all of its technology there are few people, parents or professionals, who deny that the best educational tool during these precious years, and possibly throughout life, is not a computer but is still a good old-fashioned book. As Mrs. Ratliff says, “Mostly, I want Jack to understand that letters and reading are important and fun.”

Cynthia Howe is a former Frisco resident who now lives in Aptos, CA.

Internet Guidelines for Toddlers

HERE ARE SOME guidelines with which well-seasoned parents, educators and psychologists seem to agree:

- Wait until your child shows an interest, preferably no earlier than six months; any earlier than that and their vision hasn't developed enough to focus on the screen.
- Use the computer as a way to interact with your child and try to make it as social as possible. Keep them on your lap, ask them questions about what they're seeing or what they think may happen next. Never use the computer as a babysitter or a way to disconnect from your child.
- Limit how much time is spent on the computer. Even if your baby takes an interest in your laptop, limit their time to about 10 or 15 minutes. As the child grows older the time can be extended to match the program requirements, but shouldn't be more than 30 to 45 minutes a day by the age of four or five.
- Make sure the computer programs are age appropriate. It's best to err on the side of using software that is too young vs. too old. Hold off on programs that over-stimulate. A young brain can be frightened by programs that are too loud or too graphic with vivid colors and fast moving scenes. Preschool music that has repetition, such as the itsy-bitsy spider song, helps one-year-olds establish patterns. However rock music or random rhythms can be startling for young ears.



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