

The Classroom Computer

Should your child's preschool get technical?

by Carolyn Jabs

When I was choosing a preschool for my youngest son, most programs that I looked at adhered to the basic tenets of early childhood education, such as the value of play-based education and developmentally appropriate toys. But when it came to the question of whether preschool classrooms need computers, there was much disagreement. "Of course we encourage our preschoolers to use the computer," boasted the director of one preschool. Another was just as emphatic. "We don't have computers because they don't make sense for young children," she explained to me and my husband.

Most educators agree that **computers are important for children who can read**, but feel that the benefits for younger kids are not as clear. "I don't see the advantages," says Ann-Marie Mott, lower-school coordinator at the Bank Street School for Children in New York City. "Young children need to have concrete sensory experiences." She and others in her field maintain that children aren't prepared to handle abstractions, like computer images, until they've had plenty of three-dimensional experience.

A growing number of educators argue that **the issue isn't whether a computer is in the preschool classroom, but how it is used**. "The computer is a medium that will allow kids to grow in all sorts of ways," says Jane Davidson, master teacher at the University of Delaware Laboratory Preschool in Newark. Computers, she adds, can promote social-development and problem-solving skills--and even language skills, because kids want to talk about what they're doing.

When the experts disagree, how do you decide what's best for your child?

MAKING THE MOST OF THE COMPUTER

The bottom line is not to worry if there isn't a computer in your child's preschool. However, if there are computers (either Macintosh or IBM-style PCs) for the kids to use, they should be well integrated into the classroom. Make sure that:

Computers are treated like any other classroom material.

Preschools that have a computer shouldn't overemphasize it. It should simply be available to the kids, as are blocks and puzzles. Davidson says that if she notices a child spending all his free time at the computer, she'll gently encourage him to try other activities. If she sees that another child never chooses the computer, she may invite her to check out a program that's related to something she's especially interested in.

Kids are encouraged to use the computer together.

Many experts believe that the primary benefits of the computer for young children are social. If children share the computer together, they develop skills in turn taking, negotiation, and language. There should always be at least two chairs in front of the terminal.

Children are given adequate time on the computer.

Some teachers institute a rigid schedule: 10 or 15 minutes, and then it's someone else's turn. "But many children's programs are complex, and the child needs fifteen or twenty minutes to get acquainted," says Davidson. She prefers that teachers use a flexible schedule so kids who get caught up in the software can stick with it for a while.

The computer is easy for young children to use.

Most young children don't have the dexterity or letter-recognition skills to use the keyboard. So the computer definitely needs to have a mouse, a large-size trackball, or a keyboard designed especially for little ones. Children should also be able to turn on the computer and open programs by themselves. "Kids ought to feel comfortable with the computer; it should be something they can use without adult supervision," says Davidson.

Children have access to age-appropriate software.

The best software for preschoolers won't necessarily teach them numbers or letters. Rather, three- and four-year-olds benefit from open-ended programs that allow them to explore and create in ways that interest them.

So do preschools need computers? The answer is that computers aren't necessary, but they can be a bonus in a preschool classroom. "The way the computers are used should complement everything else the teachers are trying to do with the children," says Davidson.

Carolyn Jabs, the mother of three, writes frequently about families and technology.

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