Kids and Computers

Whether you love them, hate them, or just don't care, computers are here to stay. Already the backbone of American business and industry, the computer is also rapidly transforming American education as students prepare to compete in today's technological society. Certainly there is much to recommend the use of computers in a learning environment.

Consider these benefits:

- Computers can provide a new enthusiasm and motivation for learning.
- Computers can help children learn at their own pace by offering individualized instruction both for basic skills and advanced studies.
- Computers enable teachers to identify students who require more individual attention.
- Computers are nonjudgmental in identifying errors, which is often not the case even with the most sensitive teachers.
- Perhaps most important of all, computers can provide students with instant access to whatever information they need whenever they want it.

When schools first started using computers in their classrooms, the emphasis was on teaching children how to use computer language to program them. Now the emphasis is on integrating computers into the curriculum through three basic types of software: word processing programs for writing and reports; spreadsheet programs to manipulate numbers; and graphics programs to illustrate their work.

Educational software can also supplement instruction in many areas, including reading, vocabulary, spelling, math, foreign languages, history, and science. Children enjoy writing, illustrating, and printing their stories on a computer. In schools that have access to the Internet, students can type messages back and forth to children in schools around the world, just like old-fashioned pen pals--but with lightning speed.

Computers have also been a boon in science and biology classrooms, where special hands-on software programs have done away with the need for messy experiments and the dissection of frogs. There are computers with braille keyboards for blind students, and other computers assist students with physical and/or learning disabilities.

Even if you don't have one at home, you should familiarize yourself with a computer's operation and capabilities in order to better understand its impact on your child's education. Here are some ways you can do this:

- Arrange to visit your child's school for a demonstration of educational software programs.
- If your public library has computers for patrons, make an appointment to practice on one.
- Check your local computer learning centers and commercial duplicating firms to see if they have computers available for public use at an hourly fee.
- Visit large computer stores, which often have demonstration machines set up with popular software programs.
- Rent a computer to use at home.

If you already own a computer, you can enrich your child's education by obtaining some of the many educational software programs that build creativity and self-confidence by encouraging children to explore in a game-like environment. Kids also love to roam in cyberspace through on-line services like the Internet, which offers a mind-boggling array of activities. But giving a child access to a home computer can present problems as well as benefits.

Here are some tips for parents:
- Monitor your child's computer software and watch out for games that emphasize violence.
- Establish rules and guidelines for your child's computer use.
- Limit your child's use of on-line services, especially late at night when inappropriate material and bulletin board messages often appear.
- Advise your children never to reveal their telephone number, address, school, or any other personal information on-line, and not to respond to messages that are suggestive, obscene, or threatening.
- Never allow your child to arrange a face-to-face meeting with anyone known only through on-line correspondence.