

# tot WARE

A skeptical run through  
popular toddler software

BY SARAH LAVENDER SMITH



My 15-month-old daughter shows little interest in playing with teddy bears, but the singing teddy on the *Jump Start Baby* CD-ROM (Knowledge Adventure) captured her attention the moment it danced on our computer screen. Sitting in my lap and automatically reaching for the mouse, she bobbed her head to the software's nursery tune and squealed when the animated bear waved hello.

"What do I wear on my head?" asked the bear. Thwack! Her little hands randomly slapped the keyboard, causing a hat to float toward the bear.

"Look, a hat," I said.

"At!" she parroted. Then her thwacking cut short teddy's lesson in getting dressed and transported us to a barnyard scene.

"Oooo," she moaned, spotting a cartoon cow.

I never intended to introduce my baby to computers until she reached school age — or at least until she grasped the concepts of potty training. Yet educational software makers and a growing number of parents tell me she's plenty old enough to use a keyboard and learn valuable lessons from these kinds of computer programs.

"My daughter, now 18 months, has used our Macintosh since she was 6 months old. We bought her *Jump Start Baby*, [and] she is above average in cognition and linguistics," writes one mother in a babycenter.com discussion forum, "I think much of it is due to her computer use." A poll on that website found 85 percent of

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1,514 respondents think it's OK for children under 3 to use a computer.

"You would not wait until a child is 3 to start teaching them to talk, crawl, walk; neither should you wait to teach them computers," writes another.

In today's world, computer literacy is essential. Young brains are hungry for stimulation and "wired" for learning in the first three years of life. What, then, could be better than early childhood education on the computer? Thanks to this line of thinking — and to parents' assumption that anything marketed as educational must be good for their kids — sales of software for infants and toddlers totaled \$52 million in 1998, up 21 percent from the prior year, according to the research firm, PC Data. There are 110 software products for age 4 and younger on the market today, some for users just 6 months old.

I'm not immune to parental peer pressure, so when my daughter received two totware programs for her first birthday, and when one of my smartest friends boasted about his 2-year-old's mouse skills, I caved.

We spent a few sessions with *Jump Start Baby*, which was released last year and designed for ages 9 months to 2 years. ("What's next, *Jump Start Fetus*?" mused Ann Stephens of PC Data.) Then we checked out *Jump Start Toddlers* and similar programs in the Reader Rabbit and Sesame Street series (Creative Wonders).

My daughter's enthusiasm ordinarily rubs off on me, but the more eye-catching icons I saw, the more kiddy ditties I heard, the more I wanted to log off. Do these multimedia pacifiers give preschoolers a leg up on learning the three R's? Perhaps. But I'm left wondering if they do a better job of teaching the three I's — impatience, impulsiveness and instant gratification.

A few of the things I noticed: The programs offer little incentive to move thoughtfully through an activity, since mindless trial-and-error guessing or jumping from task to task without completion is equally entertaining. They teach words and concepts in rote drills — sugar-coated with over-stimulating sound effects and animation — that disconnect the concept from its real-world context. ("W" is for "Wheat," for example, and "wheat" is a cartoonish piece of straw that dances to a disco beat, not a plant that grows and is harvested for flour.) Sometimes a keystroke or move of the mouse causes an action on the screen, while at other times no amount of typing or clicking can interrupt an animated segment — a confusing lesson in cause and effect that might leave a child regarding the computer as a magical thing that the user does not fully control.

Worst of all, my daughter squirmed and occasionally broke into tears when I encouraged her

to strike the keyboard deliberately or to wait for one segment to end before moving onto the next.

Educational psychologist Jane Healy, author of *Failure to Connect: How Computers Affect Our Children's Minds — For Better and Worse*, spent hundreds of hours observing kids at computers and concluded that the value of using them — even with "educational" software — has been vastly oversold. She warns that frequent use can hurt a child's ability to focus, dampen their motivation, dull their creativity, and retard their social skills. "Starting children on computers too early is far worse than starting them too late," she writes.

So what's the appropriate age? Healy pegs it at 7. But other early childhood experts don't see harm in letting pre-preschoolers play on the computer for 15 minutes now and then — if the child isn't pushed to use it, and if the parent is involved in the play rather than using the software as a plug-in babysitter.

"If a child never played with a computer in their first two years of life, they're not going to be at a disadvantage. More traditional kinds of play are much more beneficial," says Claire Lerner, a child development specialist with the Washington, D.C.-based group Zero to Three. She recalls watching her 3-year-old play with a software program that asked the child to illustrate a story by moving graphics around with a mouse. Point to a crown, drag it onto the princess's head. "I would much prefer her dressing up, acting out her own story, and making her own props," she says. "Computers are so stimulating and do so much that it requires a lot less of the child."

That said, toddlers inevitably will clamor to explore the computer if they see their parents working on it. At least one software maker is trying to break the mold and offer a better product for parents who want to satisfy their little one's curiosity. *BabyWow* by BowWow House is a low-key program with minimal sound effects and no cartoons. It teaches vocabulary by using still photographs and speaking in a calm adult voice, and it sits quietly, doing nothing, unless the child strikes a key or clicks the mouse. My baby enjoyed *BabyWow* for maybe five minutes, then turned away and became engrossed with a pad of Post-Its.

BowWow House founder Tony Fernandes says he endeavored to create an alternative to what he calls the "mind candy" approach of most educational software. He recalls watching his 3-year-old play some of the top-selling software titles, and "he got the same look on his face that he gets when he looks at the TV. It really bothered me." ❊

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