How to help your child with computers

Computers all around us

It is obvious to all parents and their children that computers are all around us. What teachers call ICT (Information and Communication Technology) is part of our everyday lives. In various ways, computers are now important in everything children do. They enable us to communicate with our faraway friends and family better than we have been able to do in the past. They allow children to learn history by participating in a virtual stone-age civilisation or a re-enacting of the fire of London. They help children enjoy maths by solving logical puzzles working with a friend online. This is why it is easy for us, as parents, to feel completely overwhelmed by the power and the possibilities opened by this new dimension in our lives. It seems simpler to just batten down the hatches and refuse our children access to the internet, claiming that it is dangerous or that they should have 'better things to be doing'. Of course, it is bad for children to spend five or six hours a day staring at a computer screen, but neither is it sensible to use this as a reason to deprive them of the opportunities to communicate and to learn using computers.

Safety first

Computers are powerful ways of communicating. They open a door to the outside world, and can therefore enable your child to do and see some wonderful things – including communicating with folk who are far away. However, like all ways of communicating, the internet can also be dangerous. Three simple rules make a massive difference to your child's safety whilst using the internet.

1. Keep the computer in a communal area of the house. Visible computer use is much more likely to be SAFE computer use. If your child has access to the internet when tucked away in their bedroom, they are far more liable to be at risk! Keep it public, keep it visible!
2. Use child friendly search engines, such as http://kids.yahoo.com/ or www.askkids.com. A list of such engines is provided in the downloadable advice on this page.
3. Use internet filtering software and also find out what child-protection services your Internet Service Provider offers. Do they filter spam? If not, why not?

Finally, remember that the more the internet is like the TV, a newspaper or a book – something you look at when with your family and which you talk about all the time, the greater the chance that your child will be safer and also more likely to be using it to expand their horizons in healthy and beneficial ways – which is what we all want!

Communicating with friends

The World Wide Web is not only an excellent way of finding things out, it also enables us to communicate with those who are far away. There are three main ways in which we can do this.

Skype – this acts like a long distance phone call, but with two important differences. It is free, and you can use a webcam to enable you to see the person talking to you and to enable them to see you! This makes Skype an ideal way for young children to stay in touch with family or friends who live a long way away. Children can show their uncle in Australia a drawing they have done, or their favourite toy, by holding it up to the webcam and talking to them as they do this! They can actually see their new baby cousin, and watch as he is eating his first solid food! Skype can be downloaded for free from www.skype.com

Email - this is an easy way for families and friends to keep in contact over a distance and for children in particular to communicate directly. They can stay in touch with a friend who moved away or with grandparents who live too far away for regular visits. It is more fun for reluctant writers than putting pen to paper, especially as emails tend to be short. Children can send attachments of photos, things they have written or drawn on the computer or scans of their recent drawings. They can change the font style and colour to make their emails more exciting and even add smiley faces too! It's cheaper and much quicker than snail mail – using paper, envelopes and stamps!

Family Blogs – Setting up your own blog page can be a very nice way of encouraging children to share their drawings and poems, and communicate what they have been doing in their lives. Use the instructions to set up a blog for your family provided on this site - https://www.blogger.com/start.

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Watching and listening

Computers allow children, like adults, to listen to and to watch a wide variety of things that they would never have been able to access ten or even five, years ago. CBeebies, CBBC and BBC itself all have amazing film footage – not only can children re-watch or catch up on their favourite programmes, they can experience the wider world in quite awesome ways. Listen to the haunting song of humpback whales on You Tube or take a virtual tour of some of the oldest cave paintings in Europe at Chauvet – see our suggested websites in the Topics section. If children are ill, it is sometimes nice to download and watch a film, or to use BBC iPlayer to see again a favourite episode. Follow your child's interests using the incredible resources of the internet in general and the BBC wildlife pages in particular! And You Tube enables us to not only watch a massive crocodile running around a kitchen, but also to show our children some favourite moments from our own childhood – my grandchildren were highly entertained by the clip of Danny Kaye singing The Ugly Duckling which I remembered from more than forty years ago! Watching cheetahs run and hearing humming birds hum have to count as some of the most magical experiences that the internet can bring to our children's lives.

Images and Pictures

Children quickly become experts at using modern photographic equipment. Mobile phones often contain a digital camera or you may be able to borrow one. Your child will also use a digital cameral at school. Pictures taken using this can be loaded onto the computer. This enables your child to view and select their favourite photos, to re-size or change them and also to send them via email to family or friends. Give your child the chance to use a digital camera on a day out, when playing with friends or simply to take photos around the home and then send them to their favourite people or use them to create a movie show!

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Children can also use an Image Search to track down, copy and print pictures for their own purposes – they can print pictures of their favourite footballers to decorate their walls, or use a dolphin picture to create their own poster, or simply make bookmarks of the Disney princesses! All for the cost of the paper and ink – not nothing, but still less than the cost of buying these things! And the bonus is, they are acquiring useful skills as they search – and learning new things!

Writing for a change!

The massive advantage of writing on a computer (word-processing) is that what we write can be changed, corrected and improved without having to start all over again. It can also be designed: children can choose the style of the letters, the layout of the writing and the pictures to illustrate it. As with all types of writing, the more children do it, the better they become at it! Give your child opportunities to write on the computer whenever possible. They don't need to write only stories! They can write thank you letters, design party invitations, type lists, create a letter to Father Christmas or send an email. But remember that using a computer is not always the best solution – Auntie may prefer a hand-written note! However, becoming a proficient word-processor has many advantages at home and in school. Printing out several party invites will be a lot easier than writing all those copies by hand!

Enjoy your computer!

Children enjoy using the computer – it makes learning fun and they are also developing important life skills. Drawing a picture on screen or spending some time using interactive games or listening to stories can be fun, rewarding and educational. Many suitable activities can be found on websites such as the BBC (e.g. www.bbc.co.uk/cbeebies/). It is true that it is not healthy for a child to sit staring at a screen all day, but this does not mean that the computer is not an excellent vehicle for educational and practical activities. Use it – don't abuse it!