



The Walden School
Montessori-based, Preschool–Grade 8

Computers in the Preschool Classroom?

Read *Educational Psychologist, Educator & Author, Dr. Jane Healy's Interview with Early Childhood Today*

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EARLY CHILDHOOD TODAY: Dr. Healy, in your book *Failure to Connect: How Computers Affect Our Children's Minds--for Better and Worse*, you recommend that children under the age of seven not use computers at all. Could you explain why?

JANE HEALY: In the case of the child under seven, there are few things that can be done better on a computer and many that fail miserably by comparison. Teachers and parents must understand that if young children are allowed too much access to computers, they are missing a golden opportunity to develop the personal, social, and emotional skills they will need to function effectively in adulthood. A young child's attention naturally jumps from one thing to another, and some forms of electronic media may prolong this immaturity. Distracting graphics and special effects, coupled with the temptation to click impulsively, encourage stimulus-bound behavior which, in turn, contributes to attention problems. Teachers often feel that computers interfere with their focus on language skills, imagination, thought process, internal motivation, and negotiation.

In fact, in a large study of child care, researchers found that children's intelligence, academic success, and emotional stability were determined primarily by the personal and language interactions they had with adults.

ECT: Why is seven the age boundary?

HEALY: Between ages six and seven, there is an important developmental milestone for the human brain. I believe this time is a realistic steppingstone into constructive computer use. In fact--for children above age seven-- combining computer and manipulative activities may result in better learning. Younger children, however, are better off spending this valuable time in a physically and linguistically enriched environment.

Even for children who lack this type of privileged experience, there is no evidence that computer applications will make up the inevitable gaps.

ECT: What advice do you have for early childhood teachers who are using computers with children?

HEALY: I would tell them to find ways to limit the time children spend on computers, diligently control software choices, not allow the computer to waste children's time, and be seriously concerned about computers taking precedence over social and language-related experiences. Care has to be taken that software isn't seducing children into playing non-thinking games or pushing buttons to get rewards. There are very interesting things teachers can do with computers. However, most require the one-on-one presence of an adult, because children need a teacher there to discuss, ask questions, and explain.

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ECT: What are your major concerns about electronic learning?

“Symbols must be internalized through concrete experiences before they can be understood in the abstract, such as on a computer screen. Children need to hold the counting bears and place them in a pile of three to relate that concept to the number “three.” When computers make up the images, children’s minds don’t have to work to create them.”

HEALY: Computers must never be allowed to supplant supportive human environments. And we must remember that children need practice integrating the senses through many different kinds of play experiences, managing their own minds—not having their minds distracted or programmed from outside. Symbols must be internalized through concrete experiences before they can be understood in the abstract, such as on a computer screen. Children need to hold the counting bears and place them in a pile of three to relate that concept to the number “three.” When computers make up the images, children’s minds don’t have to work to create them. In addition, electronic media can cause overstimulation and prevent children from focusing on the task at hand.

ECT: Do you think computers and technology can benefit young children with special needs?

HEALY: Yes, they can. Voice software is good for phonemic awareness and physical therapy. However, therapists want children to maximize their potential, so we don’t want to chance missing opportunities by putting children on computers too soon.

Jane M. Healy, Ph.D., has been an educational psychologist and professional educator for more than 35 years. Her most recent book, *Failure to Connect: How Computers Affect Our Children’s Minds--for Better and Worse*, will be released in paperback this October by Touchstone Books.

