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## *Early Computer Education: What's Right for Young Children?*

Computer software and even some web sites are now designed specifically for children as young as age 2 or 3. And computers are becoming more common in day care and early childhood centers. Like many parents, you may wonder whether computers are developmentally appropriate for your preschooler. Are children at this age really ready to use a computer?

Your child will probably let you know when he or she is interested in using the computer - just as was the case with other skills, like walking, talking, and potty-training. When your child finds a computer game fun, he or she is probably ready to start playing and learning. And do not worry if your child seems more interested in other activities right now. Young children will have many chances to pick up computer skills in the years ahead.

When your child seems ready, look for educational software that is age-appropriate, engaging, and challenging. These are preferable to programs one expert refers to as "drill and practice routines". These are programs that simply ask children to memorize rather than solve problems. The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) emphasizes that software should encourage young children to be active, rather than passive, learners.

The computer should be more than an "electronic worksheet" that asks children to memorize without understanding. Rather, it should create a sense of accomplishment. This will help children see the relationship between real ideas and what is presented on screen. Activities for 2- to 4-year-olds should reinforce development of thinking and motor skills such as distinguishing colors and shapes, naming objects, cutting, pasting, and painting.

The NAEYC offers these tips for parents seeking appropriate software for young children:

Use the skills list and activities described on the package to determine the software's appropriateness, and preview the software whenever possible.

Look for software that allows children to control the level of difficulty, pace, and direction of the program and to explore a number of topics on different levels. Seek software that gives quick feedback so children stay interested. The variety of sights and sounds should encourage them to use their imagination.

Whatever software you choose, keep tabs on the amount of time your child works with it and how it is used. If your child goes to a day care center that has computers, check out the software there to see whether it is developmentally appropriate.

While there are web sites geared toward preschoolers, children this age should not explore the internet on their own. Instead, you should sit down with your child and navigate directly to any educational sites that teach skills that are age appropriate.