

Plugging into Children's Media

By Kay Daly



challenge for any parent. For military parents, the challenge is even greater. Career, parenting duties, military responsibilities – not to mention the possibility of being called up – can make it tough to keep kids on track.

Thankfully, today's parents can choose from a wide variety of videos, DVDs, software programs and interactive games that use the latest technology to entertain while they enrich and enlighten. Chosen properly, these educational tools can meet both the needs of parents and kids, providing an entertaining experience that kids respond to, while ensuring their time is well spent.

Basic Guidelines

Not all media-based programs are alike. Experts offer the following guidelines for choosing and using videos, DVDs, or interactive games:

Check it out first. Just as you can't judge a book by its cover, you can't assume you know that a video or educational game will be appropriate for your child. So always preview what your child will be watching, advises Christine Pollock, the managing editor of the Coalition for Quality Children's Media-KIDS FIRST!®, a non-profit organization offering reviews of children's media..

Don't use programs or videos as a 'virtual babysitter.' Plan to be part of the experience along with your child. "The best way to use these programs is together," says Faith Nickolas, Director of Dean College Children's Center and Faculty of Early Childhood Education. "Working together on computer activities supports person-to-person interaction and team problem solving."

Keep computer sessions short. Because computer activity can be isolating, long sessions are not recommended. In fact, Nickolas reports, long periods of solo computer use has been linked to negative effects on children's physical and social development. "Short periods of use and working alongside others are the key to keeping the learning interactive and staying connected with others," she says.

Select age-appropriate media: Children are ready for different challenges at different phases of their development. Studies and ratings offered by a variety of non-profit rating organizations (see sidebar, "Guides to Children's Media") can offer guidance.

Software and Educational Games

Not to be confused with video games, educational software provides activities that claim to advance children's skills or help them master areas of knowledge. But often, these claims are not borne out. "I've found many educational software programs don't deliver what they claim," says Jennifer Beine, technology coordinator for Chairville Elementary School in Medford, New Jersey.

Still, Beine says, there are some programs that children enjoy and that can encourage them to develop skills and interests. She adds that educational software can be especially useful for children of military families, as it can provide feedback and interactivity during times when kids may not have the kind of kid-to-kid interaction they need.

Some recommended software programs include:

Kid Pix Studio Deluxe, by Broderbund Software

K-8th grade

This drawing program encourages children's creativity by allowing them to create and publish their own designs.

Cosmic Reading Journey, by Sunburst Technology

2nd grade-3rd grade

Using the 100 most-loved children's books, this reading comprehension program provides fun activities for early readers.

Millie's Math House, by Edmark

Pre-K-2nd grade

Fun-filled activities designed by early learning experts introduce fundamental math skills.

I Spy Spooky Mansion Deluxe, distributed by Scholastic

Ages 6 and up.

The American Library Association chose this interactive trip into a haunted house as one of their top computer software picks for kids for 2005. This fun

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visual and wordplay puzzle sharpens visual and problem solving skills.

Free Online Fun

As an alternative to sometimes costly software programs and interactive DVDs, Beine also recommends websites that offer free online games for kids:

Starfall

www.starfall.com

Tons of fun, free activities from pre-reading through advanced reading levels. The online format makes reading attractive to kids and allows for solo play or interaction with parents.

BBC Schools

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/schools>

The British Broadcasting Corporation offers a full library of free curriculum-based games and activities for children ages 4 through 16 on their "School" website.

PBS Kids

<http://pbskids.org>

Online games featuring characters from favorite PBS shows teach decoding and early reading skills while appealing to kids' sense of fun.

At the Movies

Not all media sessions have to be educational. Pollock recommends mixing educational experiences with "just for fun" movies. When choosing video selections, bear in mind the following guidelines:

Don't assume all cartoons are child-appropriate. Just because the animation looks child-friendly, Pollock says, that doesn't mean a feature is appropriate for your child.

Look for quality when choosing videos. Pollock advises parents to look for great story lines, well-developed characters, and situations that children can relate to. High-quality production values are also important.

Consider your child's age, maturity level and personality. "Some kids are better at handling themes and situations that may trouble other children," Pollock advises.

Furthermore, children are sensitive to different kinds of stimuli at different ages. As Pollock explains, 3- to 5-year-olds tend to respond negatively to "ugly" characters, while 10- to 12-year-olds can be traumatized by realistic representations of dangerous situations. It's important to bear these kinds of differences in mind when selecting videos.

Avoid representations of biases and stereotypes. Pollock says: "Up to age 8 or 10, children are still learning about the world around them. Programs that use stereotypes can sway what they think about people." Nickolas adds, "The 'moral of the story' should emphasize understanding of others, not just tolerance, and should build positive character traits."



How Young Is Too Young?

The media marketplace is flooded with products for infants. But studies have yet to show that these products have a positive impact. Still, moderate use of media with babies – bolstered by parent involvement and multi-sensory stimulation – can provide a rich way to interact with infants. Some highly rated programs for infants include:

Play Along with Me!, distributed by Nurture Basics (www.nurturebasics.com)
Ages 0-3

Integrating audio CDs, interactive video and highly tactile toys, this innovative program encourages social interaction and promotes cognitive, motor and language skills. The program earned high marks from Kids First!'s panel of jurors.

So Smart: First Words, distributed by So Smart (www.sosmart.com)
Ages 9 months-3 years

A two-disc DVD set that teaches vocabulary with simple stories and interactive games, this colorful program engages children and encourages parent interaction. One Kid First! juror called it the "Best infant program I've seen."

Guides to Children's Media

For advice on the best children's videos, DVDs, and computer software, consult these resources:

Association for Library Service to Children (ALSC)

www.ala.org/ala/alsc/alsc.htm

As part of the American Library Association, the ALSC publishes lists of notable books, videos, recordings, and software each year. Lists are available year-round on the association's website.

Commonsense Media

www.common sense media.org

A non-partisan, non-profit organization that provides reviews and a forum for feedback on movies, television programs, video games, music and books.

Kids First!

www.kidsfirst.org

As part of the Coalition for Quality Children's Media, Kids First! evaluates feature films, videotapes, DVDs, software, audio recordings and television using a volunteer, community-based jury.

Parent's Choice Foundation

The nation's oldest not-for-profit evaluator of children's books, videos, toys, audios, computer software, television, and magazines offers a searchable database of reviews for award-winning children's media.

SuperKids

www.superkids.com

An educational software review site covering programs for all ages with reviews written by experts, parents, and children.

