

Computers and Young Children

A Commentary by

Mary B. Verschuur, Ph.D.

Director, Lincoln Montessori School

In a recent issue of AMI Communications (2001/4) the question of computers and young children was addressed. The questioner asked the editors of this international Montessori professional journal to comment on whether or not computers and their related paraphernalia had any place in the Children's House. The respondent (who was not identified but whom one must assume represents the views of AMI) made an uncompromising argument against the use of computers in both the Children's House (pre-school) and in Lower Elementary classrooms. "Computers should not be introduced under any circumstances" (s)he noted and later added, "Introducing computers at an early age is particularly damaging to the young child, both physically and mentally," At first I was taken aback by such definite and peremptory language, but the more I thought about it, the more I began to appreciate the uncompromising directness. There may be some points worth noting both in the message and in its style of delivery.

Young, new parents (and teachers for that matter) have grown up with computers in their lives. To become "computer literate" in the 1980s was an important message delivered to young people. They were urged to take computer classes in high school and college and the culture of their age emphasized mastery of the skills to use the computer freely and to capitalize on its technologies, both personally and professionally. These same young people are now the parents of the children who attend Montessori schools. They are the young parents seeking advice and assistance in raising their children.

Statistics tell us that personal computers have become part of the furnishings in close to 50% of American households. Home is not school, but, a computer in the home is still a computer and its influence and effect on child development is the same in that setting as it is in a classroom, library or anywhere else.

Professionally, Montessori teachers are well aware of how children learn and of their basic human needs in terms of development. Movement and human contact are just two of the essential building blocks of self-construction, (and I am talking here primarily about the child under six years of age). The need to manipulate real objects is another basic human tendency. Pause for a moment and look at anyone, or even yourself, sitting in front of a computer. How much is that body moving? How many muscles are working to coordinate balance, grace, impulse and action? Likewise, what is learned about human relationship by watching two characters hug or kick one another on a screen? Compare a real hug from a child with the screen hug. Warmth and emotion, physical sensation and comfort are experienced in a hug, pain, anger and discomfort in a kick. None of these emotions can be experienced merely by watching because the give and take of human interaction is absent. The opportunities for learning about what it is to be human and how to function graciously and courteously are nonexistent in front of the computer monitor. I suspect that the drift of my argument is clear and that you can apply the principle to image versus reality when it comes to exploring one's environment. A real orange has texture, a smell, a taste. It can be rolled about like a ball, sliced to be eaten or squeezed for its juice which makes a tasty drink.

Virtual reality is something quite different from reality, and “dimensionless images ... may or may not have any relation to ... human experience” (Communications 2001/4, 38)

Parents often ask educators or other professionals for advice and guidance when facing such questions as the appropriateness of computers for their children. As a professional Montessorian I have to acknowledge that computers are part of today’s young parents’ culture, yet I have a responsibility to alert these same parents to the fact that computers have no place in their young children’s lives. Sitting at a computer is not an appropriate activity for a three year old. Age appropriate computer games or tools which filter or monitor content fail to address the more basic issue of what children need at this stage of development. Parents may not always be aware of the basic needs and tendencies of young children, and having been raised on the importance of computer literacy in their youth, they may fail to question the appropriateness of the computer, especially for their own young children.

I am not sure that in giving advice to parents one can be as direct as was the author of the answer referred to above, but I think that perhaps there is a need to be definite about the negative effects of computer use for children under seven or eight. These young, growing individuals need movement and activity, they need to explore and to make discoveries, to experiment with real things and to learn how they work. In doing so they come to know about their world and about life in society.

I suggest, therefore, that as a parent, one might raise questions with oneself that provoke thought rather than questions that require answers. Compare riding your bicycle to watching a cyclist on a screen. Manipulate your mouse or play with your child’s toy cars and trucks. Personal experience rather than theoretical knowledge may lead more quickly to understanding. Remembering how children learn, apply the same techniques of activity, discovery and manipulation to learn how children learn.

It may be too bold to say outright “computers are truly harmful to the development of the mind, the body and the human spirit”, (Communications 2001/4, 38) but if this is indeed true, consider how this information can be utilized and how it impacts on each child’s development.

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