



10 Tips for Selecting Children's Software

Years ago, finding high quality educational software was difficult. Now the problem is reversed. There is lots of software, but how do you choose the best? Although the problem can be frustrating at times, it is well worth the effort. Here are some tips to help guide your journey.

1. One size does not fit all

Make sure that your computer fits the minimum requirements for the software. The box will usually state hardware requirements in terms of processor speed and type, memory (RAM), hard disk space, graphics type, and supported sound card. If the program needs a minimum of four megs of RAM and you only have two, put down the box. When you see the word "compatible" remember that the manufacturer of what is on your computer and the developer of the software may have different ideas of what compatibility means.

2. Try before you buy

Educational software in stores comes in a shrink wrapped package and most stores have a strict policy of no returns if the box is opened. This is reasonable, since there is a risk of customers opening the box, installing and copying the software, and then returning it. The store may have a demonstration program loaded on its computers so you can try out the program. If it's not loaded, ask them if they will do it. Ask parents and teachers if they have used the program you are interested in. There are a number of excellent books that review software. If these options don't help you, stick with programs that come from the industry leaders in the field.

3. Be involved

Once children get going on computers, they can play for hours. However, you are going to be the one to install software and read the manuals. Do it at a time when the kids are not around. Once you have it running and know how it works, introduce it with some fanfare



to get them excited. You will have to ensure they haven't gotten stuck and become frustrated. Otherwise, let them explore.

4. Are we having fun yet?

There should be a built-in play factor in any software for kids. Even drill programs need to have some challenge combined with rewards for success to grab the child's attention. If a program is not fun, it won't get used. Give extra points to games that can be played with a friend.

5. Interactivity is the answer

Almost all learning programs give feedback when a child does well, but some do it better than others. Look for interesting sound effects and good visual clues on the straightforward drill programs. In programs geared to discovery, exploration and learning, look for features that permit easy linking to other parts of the program so that each time it is used it seems different.

6. When the power is off

A big plus of some programs, particularly creativity tools, is that they are useful beyond play. Writing programs and encyclopedias can be used for school

projects, drawing programs can be used to create birthday cards, or to make hats, masks and paper dolls.

7. Is it child friendly?

Kids won't sit still if they have to wait long for something to happen. The interface has to be clean, consistent and easy to understand. One advantage of using software from major suppliers is that they often use a common interface when developing a new program. Once you have learned how to use one of their packages, you can use them all.

8. Those shoes fit last week

Kids are different. Kids grow and change. One of the advantages educational software has over the schools is that it can often be more exactly suited to the learning style of any particular child. There is so much to choose from that the problem becomes how to select the right one for each child. As children age, programs that were once perfect can easily become a bore.

9. Be careful about content

You won't likely have problems with sex and violence in programs that are billed as educational software. It will never get as bad as what the kids regularly see on television. Nevertheless, there is material of an anti-social nature that can be placed on the hard drive. If children are old enough to get their own software from friends, don't assume that it is all geared to wholesome educational purposes.

10. Get a second opinion

Take time to consult with experts. There are number of excellent books and magazines available that deal with educational software for computers. These are all worth looking at to get product information and to get up to speed on computers in education.