Techno tots

By Nick Galvin
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Don't bother asking for a Barbie B-Bright Laptop in anything other than pink. That's the colour it comes in. And don't bother trying to see the logic in this - a pink computer is a beautiful thing in the eyes of most three-year-old girls, and that's all that matters.

Get over the colour and, for your $99, you get a device that looks like a miniature laptop and features 10 preschool activities such as recognising letter shapes and sounds and matching shapes.

"When they see Mummy and Daddy working at home on their own PC, they want to get involved," says Rachel Corr, product manager for the Barbie B range at manufacturers Oregon Scientific. "This introduces them to the concept of their very own PC."

To the sophisticated adult eye, this little gadget with its tiny monochrome screen looks pretty basic, but to Oregon Scientific it's a cutting-edge product in an increasingly tough battle among retailers for the hearts and minds of children and their parents.

Sales of electronic "learning aids" to pre-schoolers have gone through the roof in recent months.

In 2000, according to analysts GfK, the Australian market was worth $3.5 million, but figures for 2004 show sales have ballooned to more than $28 million.

Distributors such as Mattel (Fisher-Price Power Touch Learning System, Fisher-Price Laugh and Learn Learning Home) and Modern Teaching Aids (Vtech V-Smile Console) are clearly pushing to have their "pre-PCs" under as many Christmas trees as possible.

However, as far as these distributors are concerned, the company to catch is the American manufacturer LeapFrog, which bounced onto the scene in mid-2002 and has quickly established a position of dominance. LeapFrog has the entire preschool market covered, starting with the LittleTouch LeapPad, aimed at children from six months, through to the Leapster Multimedia Learning System for children between four and 10.
LeapFrog heavily emphasises the educational value of its products, claiming they can help with letters, phonics, rhyming, spelling, numbers, counting, addition, subtraction, art and music.

And Australian parents are being convinced, says Robert Vasy of Funtastic, which sells the toys here.

"Preschool is the biggest growth area," he says. "Parents are buying their children items in that area to cash in on the educational value. Mothers are wanting their children to learn and be educated at a younger age."

Vasy says his products have plenty of advantages over traditional teaching tools such as books, even keeping children occupied while parents get on with other tasks.

"The children can interact with the unit on their own, and that's obviously important with parents being busier," he says. "If the child can't read and the parents are not there, then the book becomes useless. In this case they can play with it alone."

But not everyone is convinced the steady march of computers into the preschool market is a good thing.

One such person is the Melbourne psychologist Michael Carr-Gregg, who has a particular interest in the area.

"Quite clearly, these parents feel guilty if they don't provide their children with the latest mod cons and that is ludicrous," he says.

"The most important task of parents in 2005 is to remain emotionally in touch with their children (and) it's very difficult to do that with the proliferation of electronic babysitters. I think, possibly, one of the most odious of these is the pseudo-games that populate their bedrooms. I actually worry a great deal about the time they are spending on these devices."

Carr-Gregg concedes that there may be some educational value in these gadgets, but only if their use is supervised and monitored by an adult.

Jane Roberts, president of lobby group Young Media Australia, shares many of Carr-Gregg's concerns and says the pressure placed on parents by some marketers is unfair.

"There is a huge marketing and advertising campaign directed at children and also at the parents saying: 'You have to give your kids a head start with this stuff and if they don't know how to use a computer by the time they start school they will be at a disadvantage'."
"The marketers are very clever. They say: 'Parents, it's not safe outside for your children. Have them happily amused in your lounge'. It plays on parents' fears that local communities, parks and playgrounds are no longer safe; but put them in front of a screen and you'll know what they're doing."

Roberts also questions what educational advantage there is in introducing children to computers - be they in the form of dedicated educational toys or the family's desktop PC.

"In those preschool and early childhood years, the best way children learn is by direct experience," she says. "So, rather than having them trace dots on the computer with a mouse, make sure you have lots of paper and crayons around to show them the importance of print.

"When you take that direct experiential opportunity away from children and put it onto a machine eventually they will learn - but at what cost?"

But the fact is that information technology is here to stay - whether we like it or not. Harking back to halcyon days when young children spent their time exclusively in "wholesome" pursuits such as climbing trees and swimming at the beach, is not the answer - something even critics such as Roberts freely concede.

Technology is ingrained in our children's lives to the point that their facility with computers and other devices often astonishes parents and teachers.

Susan Hill is an associate professor of early childhood education at the University of South Australia and has just completed a three-year study into technology and the education of young children.

Part of the study involved a group of teachers conducting a "technotour" of children's homes; examining the technology to which their pupils had access.

"The teachers were amazed at the amount of hardware and software among the four-year-olds," says Hill. "The children are born immersed in technology."

Hill found that children would naturally gravitate to a computer in, say, a preschool. But hearteningly, they tended to use the machine, talking about what they were doing, together with, say, a paint program, rather than it being a purely solitary activity.

For Hill and many other educationalists, there is nothing inherently "bad" about computer technology versus books, but the key factor is how each is used.
Toni Downes, a professor of education at the University of Western Sydney, says computers are just one of "the many communication and information technologies that populate kids' worlds".

"If an exhausted mother came home from work, picked up the two kids, and day after day sat them in the bedroom and said, 'You've got to read books while I do the housework and ignore you', that would be as unhealthy as being dumped in front of the TV," she says. "There's nothing inherently good about books."

Downes says children learn by imitating adult behaviour, which is why toy shops will always do a brisk business selling toy kitchens, plastic lawnmowers and imitation telephones.

"We've always given kids toy versions of the tools adults use so, conceptually, there's nothing wrong with creating a baby computer," she says. "However, the marketing mantra of 'Get your kids involved with computing and you'll secure their education and their future' is totally misleading and places undue pressure on parents."

And it's easy to understand how marketers exploit the confusion and guilt of parents. What parent, given the money, wouldn't spring for any amount of computer gear if they thought it would give their children an edge in a technology-saturated world?

The sensible answer to this 21st-century dilemma, according to many educationalists, psychologists and technologists, is to take a balanced approach. Clearly, if a young child is spending a lot of his or her time in front a screen on their own, they are missing out on a range of activities grouped under the heading "socialisation".

"What they are not doing [by spending too much time at a screen] is engaging in social activities with other children," says Roberts. "They're also not being physically active and creating and imagining their own play."

Downes agrees it is up to the adults in a child's life to monitor that balance - as well as keeping a close eye on the content to which they are being exposed.

"It's not so much the technology," she says. "Kids can't have too much of computers too early, but they can be exposed to too much advertising too early or too much popular culture. It's more about the substance of the experience they are having."

If an adult stays involved with the child's computing experience and ensures appropriate content and balance, "you might as well start at one week old", says Downes.
Of course, you can direct, coax and nurture all you like, but kids - especially young ones - can be contrary little critters and usually have a very firm idea in their own mind about what they want to play with. So, if you want to avoid making an expensive mistake this Christmas, you'd also do well to consider closely the personality of the youngster you're buying for.

"You've got to think about the particular child you are buying for," says Hill. "If you have a really active child that likes to go on adventures and likes to be outside digging and finding caterpillars, that child's language development would probably increase more if you gave him or her a book on caterpillars rather than a little toy computer that they won't be bothered with.

"Children choose what they really want to learn with - every parent has piles of toys that have been discarded."

**No small change**

Growth in the pre-school electronics category has been explosive in the past few years, according to industry analyst GfK.

The debut of LeapFrog's new LeapPad system in July 2002 sparked huge interest from rival manufacturers such as Fisher-Price and Vtech, who rushed their own new products to market.

Between them, Fisher-Price, LeapFrog and Vtech account for 93 per cent of the category, which has racked up sales of more than $28 million this year.

When it comes to older children, the electronic learning aids category is nowhere near as lucrative, bringing in less than $4 million up to October this year.