

COMPUTERS AND SPECIAL NEEDS: ENHANCING SELF ESTEEM AND LANGUAGE

By Joan Tanenhaus, CCC- Sp & A

How many times do young children, and especially those with special needs, hear things like this: "No, don't do that", "That's the wrong way", "Do it this way", "You're too little to do that". Probably many times, but we can help so that they don't hear it at the computer!

When playing at the computer with young children with special needs, one of the best approaches is to use software that is errorless. That means that no matter what the children do, there are no right or wrong answers. Exploration and trial and error are the learning styles that are rewarded, with fun noises, humorous animations, great graphics, lots of music and natural sounding speech. All kinds of learning goes on and there just are no things to do wrong!

One type of errorless program is what we call "Cause and Effect"- that just means the child does something on the computer (presses keys, touches a Touch Window, hits a switch, clicks the mouse button) and something happens- a picture appears, a picture animates, an action occurs. Press again and something else happens. Programs such as "Jump Start Baby" and "Sesame Street Baby" provide this kind of experience.

Another type of errorless program is open-ended and exploratory. In these, there are still no right or wrong answers, but there are choices to make. Children get an opportunity to see that they can make choices and be successful. These programs are excellent for language development, eye-hand coordination, figure-background, reading comprehension, and much more. Programs such as the electronic storybooks provide this kind of experience.

A third group of (almost) errorless programs are the "press any letter"/ "press any number" programs. These include programs like "Stickybear Early Learning", and selected activities in "Bailey's Book House" and "Millie's Math House".

If your children are young and/or unable to use the standard mouse or keyboard because of physical, perceptual or cognitive problems, there are many kinds of adaptive equipment available to help them access the computer, both at home and at school. In this way, even at a

young age, the unique qualities of the computer can be used to enhance their self-esteem and self-concept, by providing them with control, success and power. And at the same time, they will be having fun and learning!

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