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Computertots

You may have realized by now that a certain propensity toward teaching runs in this family. I'm a teacher now, too, though a rather non-traditional one. Most of my students are already taking classes at a traditional school; the teaching that I do is an addition to their regular school activities. I really had never planned to wind up as a teacher, though now that I am one, I find that I am enjoying it immensely! I'm currently the owner and Educational Director of the Fairfield County, Connecticut, franchise of a business called Computertots. Computertots is an educational enrichment program for children between the ages of 3 and 11. We carry our computers around with us to daycare centers and nursery schools, as well as elementary schools and community sites like the YMCA, and teach children right at their schools. Currently, my business employs 7 part-time teachers, plus me, and we teach about 400 children each week at about 30 different schools and centers.

Bill Gates, one of the computer gurus of our time, has said, "When I see all that technology offers a child today, I wish I were a kid again." I agree! These children are having a blast, learning while using the computer as a tool, which of course makes it a lot of fun for the teachers, too! In some cases, Computertots is a child's first introduction to the computer, but more and more of our 'Tots are experienced computer users, with computers at home.

I got into Computertots almost by accident. I had just finished an MBA degree, after which I had joined IBM's financial group, where I realized on day 2 of my new job assignment that I was not cut out for the job. Fortunately, shortly after my starting with IBM, the company offered an "early retirement" payment package, so, after spending the next few months figuring out what I REALLY wanted to do in life, I "retired" from IBM, with a check for leaving the job that I disliked so! What a deal!

During my figuring-out period, I had gone to career counseling, where I was told that I should be thinking about entrepreneurship, or perhaps working with children, so perhaps I could combine the two. Not thinking that this was a realistic possibility, imagine my surprise when I read an article about Computertots! I sent away for information about the company, and was once again surprised when I got a telephone call a week later from a woman who said that she was selling the Fairfield County, Connecticut (where I lived), franchise for Computertots, and would I like to buy it? So, basically, I took the check from IBM, and sank it (plus some more) into Computertots. I still think that Bill, my husband of only one year at that time, thought that we were just tossing that money away, but I have to give him a lot of credit and many thanks for having the faith in me to support me in my pursuit of this opportunity.

Most of our students are Computertots, who are between the ages of 3 and 5. We also teach Computer Explorers, who are between 6 and 8 years old, and Advanced Explorers, who are up to 11 years old. We'll soon have to start another category, since I am constantly being asked about classes for adults and seniors, two groups whose needs are not yet being addressed.

Computertots start on the computer at age 3, and use desktop computers with sound capability, so that the computers can talk to the children (and the children can talk back). The computers used in class are regular, "adult," computers, with regular keyboards and accessories, to get children comfortable with them, but the software is designed specifically for the age groups.

Curriculum software is chosen to maximize interaction not only between the child and the computer, but also among the children in class, and there is usually a lot of discussion during class time about where to find the next clue, or what color to color the next piece of the picture, or why something happened the way that it did. Each class has a maximum of 4 students, sharing one computer, since we have found that children at the younger ages prefer to play on the computer with buddies, rather than work in the one person/one computer/gotta-finish-this=assignment adult model. Classes are generally a half-hour long for the 3-5 year old Computertots, but are usually longer for older children.

We teach 3-5 year old Computertots the same sort of things that they are learning in their nursery classrooms: letters, shapes, colors, science concepts, numbers and the like, using the computer as a learning tool. Computer Explorers (ages 6-8) learn reading and math, thinking and problem solving skills. Advanced Explorers, up to age 11, generally work in a computer "lab" situation, working alone or perhaps sharing a computer between two Explorers if they prefer. These older children are learning advanced skills like typing, and are doing any of various projects, like building a city or "morping" (changing) a picture (of themselves or of something else) into a different picture of something else, and generally using the computer as a tool the way an adult would, to work on a project. Our goal is to get children comfortable with the computer, since we know that children will not be able to avoid using this important tool when they are adults, as many of their parents (in my generation) still can!

It is unbelievable to me to think about how far things have come already in just a part of my lifetime. I worked on a computer for the first time when I was in high school (1979-80). Madison (NJ) High School had a computer that was about 4 feet high by 3 feet by 3 feet, and it rolled around on a cart. We programmed it by using a pencil to mark little squares on a series of cards, which were fed into the computer. The program we wrote were things like "have the computer write your name 5 times, then stop." We thought we were really modern when, after we had the program right, the computer would spit out a punched paper tape that we could use to load the program again without using the cards. Pretty cool, but it doesn't compare to what these kids can do already!

Even in the three years that I've been a part of Computertots, I've seen a huge change in technology available, especially to children. When I started teaching with Computertots in 1992, we used Apple IIC computers with no hard drive, which were the ones in schools. Educational software was generally of the "drill and practice" variety: A,B, _, fill in the blank. Now, just 3 years later, one of my favorite programs is a math program, where children fit small, medium and large shoes on small, medium and large characters. If the wrong size show is applied (either through trial-and-error or on purpose), the character says "Ouch, too tight!" or "These are too big!"

Most children take easily to the computer, and are empowered to do many things with their computer skills. Using this tool, children can plan a birthday party, make it rain, excavate dinosaur bones, create and color silly creatures, make a movie, capture elves, read a story and play with the characters in it, build a bug, learn environments, the alphabet and more. It's often the adults that have a hard time with 3-5 year olds using computers. Some nursery-school teachers and daycare directors (of my generation and older) are not yet convinced that the computer is a good learning tool for this age group, and therefore will not support computer education during these early learning years. Many parents (of my generation) are not computer literate, or are even computer=phobic, or sometimes are just too protective of their financial investment in a home computer to allow their children to use one at home.

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Most children here in Fairfield County will see and get to work with a

computer when they reach elementary school, but even in the wealthiest towns, schools still have old computers that cannot take advantage of the great new software and technologies that are available today. It is the rare school that has access to the kind of technology that can really allow children to broaden their horizons using technology, much less afford to <u>stay</u> on the cutting edge for these children. This is sad for the children who do not have access to the computer at home or through a program like Computertots, but I am taking it as a business challenge, and trying to reach these kids any way I can!

Our students are always eager for "Computertots day," and in fact the Computertots teachers often get swarmed and hugged by many little arms upon arrival at school or daycare center. Teaching with and running Computertots is a very rewarding enterprise, since it offers the chance to work with young minds and really be able to see confidence grow as children learn. I love having "computer fun...with the little ones" at Computertots!