

How Computers Affect Our Children's Minds

When Jane Healy learned that new software had been created to introduce 7-month-old babies to computers, she realized that things had really gotten out of control. Healy is the author of *Failure to Connect: How Computers Affect Our Children's Minds — and What We Can Do about It*. And she is a longtime educational psychologist and one of the most outspoken critics of the entrenched American view that schools can't spend enough on computerizing classrooms, even for very young children. She is not alone. A growing number of educators in the United States have begun to question just how beneficial computers are in the classroom and at which age kids should be introduced to them. The debate raging in the United States is being closely watched by European and Asian educators who welcome technology but also want to learn from American mistakes.

According to US government statistics, 26 percent of American school children aged 5 to 9 years old spent time on computers while at school in 2004. Yet very little independently funded research has been conducted to examine what impact computers have on children's cognitive and emotional development. Healy says, "Technology was put into American schools with very little planning, forethought or educational rationale," "My concern is that this is very powerful technology, the effects of which we don't really know."

Most critics of wired classrooms stress that it is especially troubling to see so much money spent on technology at a time when budget cuts have eliminated many music and art classes. To be fair, with the American economy declining, there have been cuts across the board. Still, technology expenditures have surged. In 1996, the federal government granted states \$81 million for technology in schools. By 2003, that number had jumped to \$2.76 billion. That is an increase of over 30 times. Government data show that by the age of 10, young people are more likely to use the Internet than adults at any age beyond 25. But according to Larry Cuban, professor of education at Stanford University and the author of *Oversold & Underused: Computers in the Classroom*, computers simply have not produced much of a return on investment. He says, "There's very little evidence that kids are doing better academically because of computers in the classroom. Computers haven't made teaching more productive."

Then they are American educators spending so much on them? Many critics blame the computer industry's lobbying muscle — and deep pockets. Other stress the keeping-up-with-the-neighbors mentality that causes schools to try constantly to outdo each other. In any case, the US Department of Education leaves the specifics of classroom computer usage up to individual teachers and schools.

As Healy saw during the two years she spent visiting classrooms across the United States, computer use varies greatly from district to district, but it has been on the rise almost everywhere. So is the danger. Healy says, "In Europe, they're willing to let preschoolers be preschoolers much more than we are in America. The human brain has a life of its own, and if

you put artificial electronic stimulation in front of young kids, what the brain is programmed to need is not happening.” Despite all the rosy projections, those wires may be tying down our kids, not setting them free.

Questions:

1. What made Jane Healy think that “things had gotten out of control” ?
2. What do European and Asian educators want to learn from American colleague?
3. What is Professor Larry Cuban's criticism of introducing computers into the classroom?
4. How much is the increase of the budget of the federal government for technology in schools from 1996 to 2003?
5. What is Jane Healy's conclusion after her two years' observation of classroom activities across the United States?

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