

The Impact of Home Computer Use on Children's Activities and Development, KRAUT, GREENFIELD and GROS

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Abstract

The increasing amount of time children are spending on computers at home and school has raised questions about how the use of computer technology may make a difference in their lives—from helping with homework to causing depression to encouraging violent behavior. This article provides an overview of the limited research on the effects of home computer use on children's physical, cognitive, and social development. Initial research suggests, for example, that access to computers increases the total amount of time children spend in front of a television or computer screen at the expense of other activities, thereby putting them at risk for obesity. At the same time, cognitive research suggests that playing computer games can be an important building block to computer literacy because it enhances children's ability to read and visualize images in three-dimensional space and track multiple images simultaneously. The limited evidence available also indicates that home computer use is linked to slightly better academic performance.

The research findings are more mixed, however, regarding the effects on children's social development. Although little evidence indicates that the moderate use of computers to play games has a negative impact on children's friendships and family relationships, recent survey data show that increased use of the Internet may be linked to increases in loneliness and depression. Of most concern are the findings that playing violent computer games may increase aggressiveness and desensitize a child to suffering, and that the use of computers may blur a child's ability to distinguish real life from simulation. The authors conclude that more systematic research is needed in these areas to help parents and policymakers maximize the positive effects and to minimize the negative effects of home computers in children's lives.