

y James and Sara Malgieri

e have been buying software for my 31-month-old son, Aran, since he was 9-months-old. As he grew older and more aware, Aran wanted to know what we were looking at in the newspaper, what the weather channel was telling us about our area's forecast, and how soon his favorite cartoon would be on TV. For this he needed to know numbers, the alphabet and basic addition and subtraction. The time had come for him to learn these skills. I needed help beyond what the story telling, game playing, exploration and problem solving software offered, something that would help me help my child learn what he needed to know at this point in his quest for knowledge. What we found, and perfect for our needs, was The Playroom by Brøderbund, the creator of *Where in the World is Carmen Sandiego?* and essentially the founders of the "Edutainment" category

The original Playroom that concentrated on letters and numbers to introduce children to the basics of reading and math was introduced in 1989 and made into a Macintosh CD-ROM title in 1995 as part of Brøderbund's Active Mind Series. The Active Mind Series was built with a more developed and effective educational focus. It was designed around specific educational goals and tutoring approaches based on the input of parents, children, teachers and leaders in the field of education.

The series delivers higher quality software and educational activities while maintaining the fun expected from Brøderbund. Whatever the activity, it has to be fun for children to use on

a regular basis. Brøderbund stressed the Playroom was not meant as a substitute for classroom activities. The products of the Active Mind Series recognize that home educational software should effectively augment school teaching and tries to find the perfect balance between content, creative approach and technical implementation. The multi-level games and activities of The Playroom encourage logical thinking, creativity, and exploration while building skills and confidence.

The Playroom helps to develop the following skills:

- Counting: Counting to 12 and counting by matching one object to another.
- Letter Recognition: Connecting the spoken letter with the written symbol for each letter.
- Number Recognition: Connecting the spoken word with the numeric symbol and the number of objects it represents.
- Phonics: Learning the sounds of letters and numbers.
- Word Recognition: Connecting the spoken word with the written symbols and with the picture it represents.
- Vocabulary Building: Learning to use new or different words or sets of words to describe an object or scene.
- Spelling: Forming a word by naming and typing the letters of the word in order.
- Telling Time: Relating time to an analog clock (a traditional clock with hands), to a digital clock and by counting the tones at each hour.
- Introduction to Addition and Subtraction: Practicing counting forward and backwards — skills that prepare children to learn addition and subtraction.
- Color and Shape Recognition: Identifying basic colors and shapes, learning about mixing colors.
- Problem Solving: Using various strategies — looking for patterns, making patterns, eliminating possibilities — to think about and find a solution to a problem.
- Keyboarding: Associating the letters of the alphabet with the positions of those letters on a standard keyboard and using them appropriately.
- Mouse Control: Properly using the mouse with the computer interface to bring about the desired effect.

n the Playroom, two mice — Pepper and Ginger — are introduced to your child. One of them is chosen by the child to act as host to a playroom that contains ten games. Five of the games are relatively simple activities that occur within the Playroom screen. The remaining five are more complex exercises that take place in their own window environment. The five complex activities — and what they convey are:

- **Spinner Game:** Focuses on counting to 12 by counting various objects. You learn that 10 is always 10, whether it is 10 teapots or 10 ducks and learn to recognize numbers using visual and sound cues. Within this exercise is a counting game that has four levels of difficulty. If the correct numeral on the spinner wheel is chosen, your child will see a fun animation. If the wrong number is chosen Ginger, or Pepper, will help to count the objects and show which numeral to pick.
- **Computer Game:** Focuses on early reading skills. The child is urged to explore the keyboard and discover the relationship between uppercase and lowercase letters. You type upper and lower case letters, hear them pronounced and can form short words containing letters from A to Z. This helps to develop reading, spelling and keyboarding skills. Within this activity is a spelling game with three levels of difficulty. Eleven crates, with their corresponding names under them, appear on the screen. The child chooses a crate, spells its name and when done sees an animation. If the wrong letter is chosen during the spelling, Ginger, or Pepper, will show the correct one.
- **ABC Book:** There are three “colorforms” sets, background scenes, to which you can add figures. There are separate figures for each letter of the alphabet and each background scene has its own set of figures. The purpose is to help children associate letters and words, for example “F is for Father,” while audio playback of letters and short words reinforces phonics for readers and pre-readers alike. The child can select and arrange objects to create imaginative stories. When the child is satisfied with the created picture it can be printed and displayed for all to see.
- **Mousehole Game:** A three level counting game introduces children to addition and subtraction, as well as to game play strategy. Two children can play against each other or a child can play alone against the computer choosing between two levels of difficulty.
- **Clock: Telling time:** Children learn to tell time to the nearest hour on the clock face, on a digital clock, in words and by counting the number of notes the clock sings. Ginger and Pepper are always on hand to demonstrate typical activity for any given hour. The only thing I would add to this would be two levels of difficulty: telling time to the nearest half and quarter hour.

The remaining activities are:

- **Mixed-Up Toy:** Encourages creativity by matching a variety of body parts from different characters to produce a silly character. Conversely, the child can match the proper body parts to produce the correct figure. When the child is satisfied with the created character he/she can print the screen. Aran likes to hang his pictures on the kitchen refrigerator for all to see.
- **Bulletin Board:** Learn Safety words like “Don’t Walk” and “Walk,” “Exit,” “Yes,” “No,” etc.

- Colors and shapes: Experiment mixing yellow, red and blue to see what color will be created. Create, rotate and color a three-dimensional object using your selected color.
- Blocks: Build vocabulary by associating short words with animated objects.
- Juke Box: Play five original songs about counting, letters, words, and time.

The Parent's Corner, a special section in the User's Guide, describes the skills children develop from each activity, suggests activities to enrich the learning experience at or away from the computer that parents and children can share and provides a list of useful educational resources.

Aran is very enthusiastic about demonstrating the skills he has acquired in The Playroom. He smiles and dances in his seat while playing. He even allows Mom and his brother, Brian, to play. A memorable moment occurred for my wife after she mistakenly chose a wrong button to resume play and Aran seriously advised her by saying, "No, this button, Mom."

The Playroom is definitely for the younger child. Introducing it to a child of about 2 1/2 years of age will promote a stronger attachment to the software. The appeal of the program and the rewards of play will guarantee several years of interest. I whole heartily recommend it.

Pros

- Very intuitive, easy to use mouse driven point-and-click interface
- Teaches your child the basics of counting, ABCs and telling time
- Multiple levels of complexity to keep a child challenged
- Fun to use
- Excellent on-line help for each activity and screen
- Children become familiar with computers as they become familiar with learning
- Songs from the CD can be played on any audio CD player
- Excellent animation
- The manual refrains from using the words, "charming," "delightful," "cherish" and other "buzz words" that are so overused in other user guides. It is clearly written and readily understandable

Cons

- There is a bit of a load time between activities and with nothing on the screen to indicate the application is working there is some confusion as to what is occurring
- From the internet misc.kids.computer news group: Some parents feel The Playroom is "kind of limited" and are "less happy with its depth"

Publisher Info

Brøderbund Software, Inc.
500 Redwood Blvd.
PO Box 6121
Novato, CA 94948-6121

Tel : 1-415-382-4740 or 1-415-382-4400
Fax: 1-415-382-4419 or 1-415-382-4582

Brøderbund Bulletin Board 1-415-883-5889
CompuServe - Address: 70007,1636, GO BB
America Online - Keyword: "BRODERBUND"

The school edition of this software can be obtained from 1-800-521-6263.