

Amazing Laptop Computer

GeoSafari Jr

Headstart Computer

IQ Personal Computer

Little Smart Alphabet Phonics Teacher

PreComputer Prestige

PreComputer Unlimited

Talking Whiz Kid Major Mouse



Kids' stuff

OK, we know practical experimentation is good for children, but can we bear to help them do it? Letting them cook, when the cake-making exercise will inevitably spread across the kitchen and you, or letting them join the local football team, which involves you having to spend freezing Sunday after-

noons out on a cold, wet pitch, yelling whole-hearted encouragement. Similarly, early computer experience is incredibly good for kids - indeed, it's part of the National Curriculum - but does their keyboard practice have to take place on *your* keyboard? It cost a lot of money, after all, so do you really want their grubby little fingers leaving sticky prints behind? Or accidentally deleting your precious files? Or looking at, ahem, your collection of art pictures?

For whatever reason, you may prefer that your offspring stay away from your PC. But fear not,

because there's a growing collection of computer toys, that not only look like the real thing, but provide plenty of useful learning material too. And since even the most expensive of the models reviewed here costs but a fraction of the price of a 'real' computer, you can feel more relaxed about the treatment it gets along the way.

It's good to expose children to computers at an early age but do you really want to use your PC as their playground? We look at a variety of alternatives designed to save your system



Illustration by Philip Morrison

Amazing Laptop Computer

This neat little notebook computer is designed for children aged from four to seven years old – it has a very attractive red and green lid, together with splendidly chunky keys on the keyboard. These show

both upper and lower case letters, so it's suitable for children just starting to learn their alphabet as well as for more knowledgeable youngsters.

Given that the Amazing Laptop is targeted at children as



young as four, it has to be usable without assuming any reading skills at all and, amazingly enough, this proved to be possible. Some simple buttons on the keyboard, including a Demo button that demonstrates any game or activity, flashing lights and, crucially, some understandable spoken commands – combined with an inquisitive four-year-old tester – produced many happy, productive hours.

For the younger of our two chief testers, the games were probably the most

suitable activity, while the number, maths, spelling and grouping exercises were challenging enough for the seven-year-old tester. There are two skill levels, making this toy suitable for sharing between brothers and sisters, perhaps, or simply giving it a longer life span with one child. Parents will appreciate the volume control, and the fact that you can buy extra software cartridges by mail order, for further variety.

The most popular computer with our four-year-old tester, the Amazing Laptop is fun as well as educational.

- £44.99 (inc VAT)
- IQ Builders: 01235 546700

Amazing Laptop Computer

Build quality	★	★	★	★	★
Ease of use	★	★	★	★	★
Value for money	★	★	★	★	★

GeoSafari Jr

The GeoSafari stands out from the others in this roundup as it looks nothing like a computer. It consists of a large plastic stand against which you place one of a selection of supplied cards.

At the bottom of the stand, you'll find a keypad and your first task is to key in the code number that's printed on the card you're using, together with lots of other information.

Once you've got all this sorted out you can proceed to the activity itself. You get 20 cards in the GeoSafari Jr set, and these



cover topics like early maths and reading, through to more advanced science and geography. Some of the cards are very attractive, and our four-year-old tester was keen to try them out. It

soon became apparent, though, that a fair amount of adult help was going to be needed to keep this activity going, as

interaction with the toy is quite complex. Questions are printed on the cards, and a light that stops at random indicates which question is being asked. The answers are also printed on the cards, with a number. You type in the number that corresponds to the correct answer. **Not the most inspiring toy we tried, and certainly too hard for younger children to use alone.**

- £19.99 (inc VAT)
- Early Learning Centre: 01793 831300

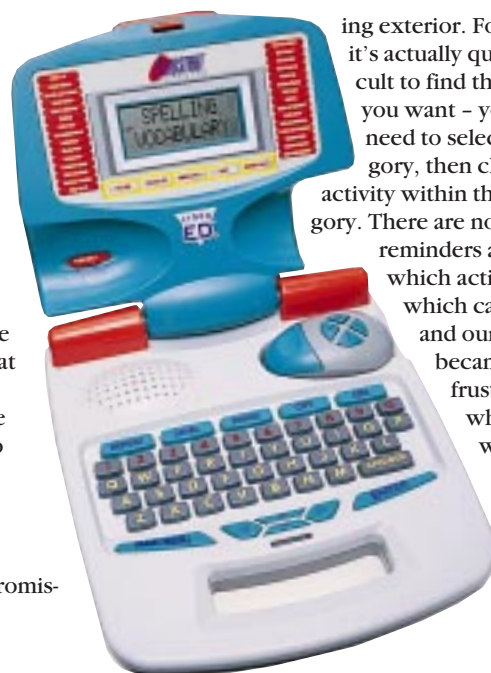
GeoSafari Jr

Build quality	★	★	★	★	★
Ease of use	★	★	★	★	★
Value for money	★	★	★	★	★

Headstart Computer

Beautifully presented, the Headstart Computer will make any child feel like they're using the 'real thing' – it's smart and colourful, and comes complete with a real mouse. The good news for parents is that the computer is certainly very rugged indeed, and the mouse is firmly attached, so there's virtually no chance of it being disconnected and lost.

Unfortunately, this one doesn't live up to its very promis-



ing exterior. For starters, it's actually quite difficult to find the activity you want – you first need to select a category, then choose an activity within that category. There are no reminders as to which activity is in which category, and our testers became quite frustrated when they were hunting for particular games. The

games and activities themselves are quite acceptable, if a little uninspiring at times. They also seem to last for too long, so that you'll eventually think 'Oh, I've had enough of this' and stop in despair, rather than on the triumph of finishing a level or a round of games. Also, perhaps rather disconcertingly, it's a decidedly American voice that says 'Nice try!' or 'Great job!' in response to your input.

Give this one to a good reader, or be on hand to offer plenty of help.

- £49.99 (inc VAT)
- Tiger Electronics: 01423 501151

Headstart Computer

Build quality	★	★	★	★	★
Ease of use	★	★	★	★	★
Value for money	★	★	★	★	★

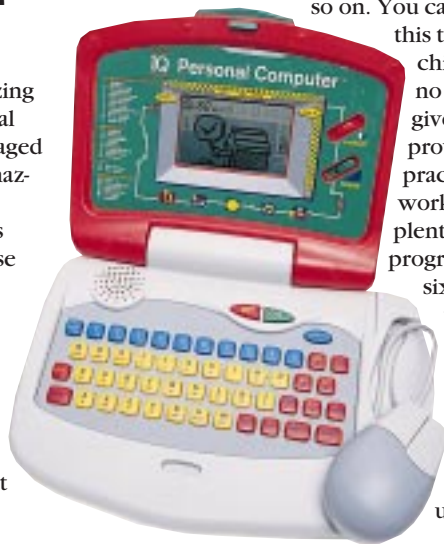
IQ Personal Computer

Big brother to the Amazing Laptop, the IQ Personal Computer is for children aged five and over. Like the Amazing Laptop, it's colourful, smart and rugged, but this model comes with a mouse and mouse mat.

The educational activities are quite similar, but you do get slightly more of them. There's the same kind of focus on traditional English skills – things like finding the past tense of the given verb,

putting in the missing letter, spelling and so on. You can't really expect this to teach your child, as there are no explanations given, but it does provide valuable practice of school-work. And there's plenty of scope for progress, as there are six levels to work through.

Other nice features include a calculator, a notepad, and an art studio, as well as the very useful time tutor



– this is just the right level for children struggling with clocks and watches. If you're still looking for more, it's possible to print from this computer to a limited set of standard printers and, of course, you can buy extra software cartridges.

Despite being very similar to the Amazing Laptop, the Personal Computer proved less popular with our testers, who said it was harder to use.

- £59.99 (inc VAT)
- IQ Builders: 01235 546 700

IQ Personal Computer					
Build quality	★	★	★	★	★
Ease of use	★	★	★	★	★
Value for money	★	★	★	★	★
Overall	★	★	★	★	★

Little Smart Alphabet Phonics Teacher

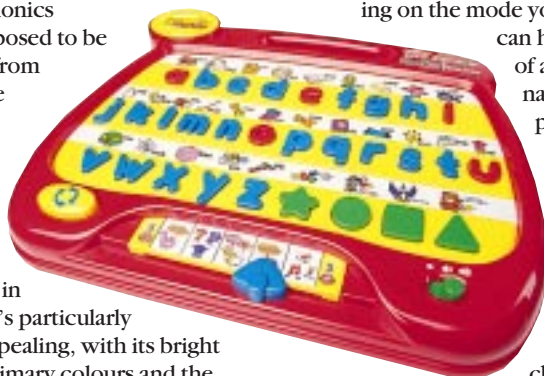
The Alphabet Phonics Teacher is supposed to be for children aged from two to five, but we found a toddler of not quite a year old was more than a little interested in it. It's particularly appealing, with its bright primary colours and the shaped characters on the key-

board that just cry out to be felt and explored by inquisitive tinies.

It's surprising how much can be squeezed into an apparently simple toy – this alphabet tray has five modes that you select by means of a sliding bar. Depending on the mode you select, you

can hear the sound of a letter, its name, the word pictured by the letter or some music. Some shapes are included, too, and there's even an introduction to Braille characters.

VTech seems to have thought of



everything – there's even volume control.

While a very young child will enjoy the colours, feel and noise of this toy, an older one will learn or reinforce letter sounds and names. However, it's debatable whether it would be worth giving to a child at the top end of the age range, as there isn't really enough material and variety to maintain interest.

Ideal for children just starting to recognise their letters.

- £19.99 (inc VAT)
- VTech: 01235 546810
www.vtech.com

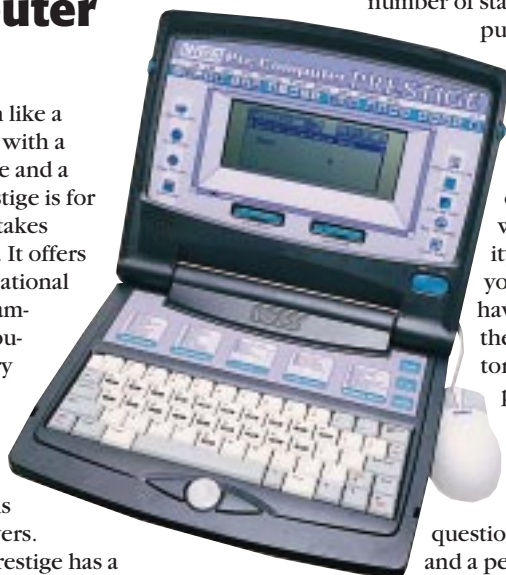
Little Smart Alphabet Phonics Teacher					
Build quality	★	★	★	★	★
Ease of use	★	★	★	★	★
Value for money	★	★	★	★	★
Overall	★	★	★	★	★

PreComputer Prestige

Looking very much like a grown-up laptop, with a sleek, matt black case and a grey mouse, the Prestige is for the older child who takes computers seriously. It offers all the standard educational activities, such as grammar, fractions, vocabulary, algebra and story problems, with several skill levels to work at. It's not all serious, though, as music and animations reward correct answers.

In addition, the Prestige has a

number of standard computer applications. A word processor and spellchecker introduce the real world of computing, while the facility to print out your work (if you have a printer) is the prime motivator here. There's plenty else to occupy your child – a host of general knowledge questions, logic games and a personal organ-



iser should keep anyone happy for quite a while. And there's even BASIC programming for the technically minded. If that's not enough, you can buy additional cartridges with further features but even as it stands the Prestige has a lot to offer. What we liked most of all was its ease of use and its friendliness – 'Can we play again?'

The Prestige makes learning fun for the older child, and introduces real computer applications as well.

- £99.99 (inc VAT)
- VTech: 01235 546810
www.vtech.com

PreComputer Prestige					
Build quality	★	★	★	★	★
Ease of use	★	★	★	★	★
Value for money	★	★	★	★	★
Overall	★	★	★	★	★

Children's software

If you have got the nerve to let the kids loose on your PC, you'll find any amount of good-quality software for them to use, from the very earliest ages. It's possible to find good titles at budget prices – as



little as £10 – but the titles mentioned here typically cost around £20-£35.

For the real tinies, **Pingu** is particularly enjoyable, while the

Noddy CD-ROM has a lot of entertaining activities, too (*BBC Multimedia: 01483 268888*). A child as young as two or as old as seven can enjoy **Green Eggs and Ham**, just one of many pleasing animated storybooks from Living Books (*Living Books: 01429 520250*). Disney Interactive also offers a good range of storybooks, or the new Story Studios, with their enhanced activities – look out for the **Little Mermaid** or the newest release, **Mulan**. Or try the excellent **Maths Quest**, featuring Aladdin characters (*Disney Interactive: 0181 222 1000*).

For reference material, Dorling Kindersley is hard to beat, with an impressive range of dictionaries and encyclopaedias, as well as the highly interactive **Explorer** titles, which are fun as well as educational (*Dorling Kindersley: 0171 753 3488*). And finally, don't forget Microsoft, which also offers a selection of educational titles – for an older child, **Encarta** is a superb (if expensive) reference, which can be shared by the whole family (*Microsoft: 0345 002000*).

PreComputer Unlimited

This is another toy that stands out from the crowd, and for all the right reasons. In fact, the Unlimited can't really be called a toy at all, as its emphasis is quite firmly on computer applications.

You have to plug the Unlimited into a TV screen – you could see this as a bonus or a disadvantage. On the plus side, you get a large, full-colour

screen that's easy to read. On the downside, you have to have a spare TV, or a forgiving family. Once you're connected, you have a computer that looks very

much as though it's running Windows 3.1, with applications divided into programming groups. And, indeed, all the applications you could reasonably ask for are there –

word processing, spreadsheet, painting and personal organisers. You can save your work and print it,



too, if you have one of the standard printers. It's even possible to swap information with a 'real' PC via a cable link, but we didn't try this out.

There's plenty of bonus material, too, in the form of trivia quizzes, games and demonstrations, making this expensive model pretty good value for money. **It's a 'pre-computer' rather than the real thing, but it gives an excellent grounding in the world of real computers.**

● £139.99 (inc VAT)
● VTech: 01235 546810
www.vtech.com

PreComputer Unlimited				
Build quality	★	★	★	★
Ease of use	★	★	★	★
Value for money	★	★	★	★
Overall	★	★	★	★

Talking Whiz Kid Major Mouse

In a smart, two-tone grey case with matching mouse, the Major Mouse is clearly aimed at the older child – but the good news is that it's just as sturdy and robust as the models you find for four-year-olds.

The suggested age range is for from six to ten years, so we tried it out on a boy right in the middle of this range. He certainly coped very well with it, finding



the activities he wanted to try with no bother, and choosing the right skill level just as easily. Some of the educational content may seem quite daunting to a younger child but as so much is included, there should still be enough of interest that's readily accessible. There's a good selection of trivia questions on assorted subjects, which can be a useful way of

boosting a child's general knowledge.

The games on Major Mouse seemed to be particularly enjoyable, partly because they could be played in one- or two-player modes, allowing children to pit themselves against one another. However, the educational activities also seemed motivating, with fun animations rewarding correct answers.

Well built, solidly educational and entertaining as well, this model is definitely a good buy. Sheila Hill

● £59.99 (inc VAT)
● VTech: 01235 546810
www.vtech.com

Talking Whiz Kid Major Mouse				
Build quality	★	★	★	★
Ease of use	★	★	★	★
Value for money	★	★	★	★
Overall	★	★	★	★