While everyone agrees that education and computers go hand in hand, buying software for children to use can be a nightmare. Most shops stock only a fraction of the titles available, so you can't be certain that what you see is the best you can get. There's also the task of trying to make sure that the software you use at home is the same or reasonably similar to the software used in schools. And then there is the problem of cost: nobody has money to waste.

Software purchases must be made with extraordinary care, so how do you make the right choice? There is some help on the horizon and it is to be found in a Government scheme with one of the most boring and unimaginative names of all time: Multimedia Portables for Teachers. As part of this scheme software publishers were invited to submit titles for evaluation. The titles first had to pass a fairly rigorous selection criteria and were then tested by education experts at the British Educational Communications and Technology Agency (BECTa).

BECTa has not released its list of the crème de la crème of educational software, but we have been able to take a sneak look at some of the titles that passed the evaluation process. Although these were chosen for classroom use, they do give some guidance to home users on the best software for the family PC.

Starting from scratch

With or without BECTa's list, what software is there available and what features should you be looking for? Ultimately your purchasing decisions will be dictated by your personal needs, the age of the child and whether you are buying for home or school use, but there are a few useful guidelines and some essentials for any software collection.

A word processor is essential, and the ideal package to get is an office suite. These combine a word processor, database and spreadsheet, often along with one or more additional applications such as a presentations package. It is likely that a suite was supplied as part of a software bundle with your computer. If not, there are several to choose from. BECTa recommends Microsoft Office Professional.

Your first buy should be a general-purpose encyclopaedia, ideally one with a suitable reading age for your children. GSP has recently launched *The Kid's Multimedia Encyclopaedia,* which contains over 2,000 entries specially written for children aged from between eight to 13.

Probably the most widely-used encyclopaedia is Microsoft's *Encarta.* It is excellent and the content has been strongly localised – one problem with many encylopaedias is that they are American and a search under 'Birmingham' is more likely to take you to an article about Birmingham, Alabama,

CLASS ACTS

The National Curriculum

We have concentrated on software applicable to the National Curriculum, which was introduced into schools in England and Wales in 1988 and set out what pupils should study and the standards that they should achieve. Revised in November 1994, it is statutory in England and Wales and accounts for about 80 percent of a child's time in school.

Broadly speaking, the National Curriculum covers four age groups and 10 subjects. The age groups are called Key Stages. Key Stage 1 is up to age seven, Key Stage 2 from seven to 11, Key Stage 3 from 11 to 14 (pre-GCSE), and Key Stage 4 from 14 to 16 (preparation for GCSE and equivalent vocational qualifications).

There are three subjects called 'core' subjects – English, Mathematics and Science (in Wales, Welsh is a core subject) – and seven 'foundation' subjects – Technology, History, Geography, Music, Art, Physical Education, and a modern foreign language. In Scotland and Northern Ireland the Curriculum is slightly different, but the purpose and aims are essentially the same as in England and Wales.

You can purchase a copy of the National Curriculum as one complete volume or for individual subject areas. It is also available as ASCII text files on four 3^1/$_2$in disks or you can access it on the Internet at www.dfee.gov.uk/nc/

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than Birmingham in the UK. Localisation not only means that you'll be taken to Birmingham in the UK, but that the program reflects British viewpoints.

If you want a home-grown encyclopaedia, there's *The British Multimedia Encyclopedia* from GSP and the BECTa-recommended *The Europress Family Encyclopedia 1998 Edition*. The latter incorporates the *Cambridge Encyclopaedia* and 20 other reference works, and has a singular 'multimedia creator' which enables children to create their own slide show using text and pictures from any part of the CD-ROM.

There is also no doubt that a good electronic atlas knocks a book atlas into a cocked hat. Microsoft's *Encarta World Atlas* is one of the best and received BECTa's nod of approval along with *3D World Atlas.* The Microsoft *Encarta World Atlas* has excellent maps and

superb magnification – which at its highest resolution shows over a million place-names. There is also a selection of maps: topographical, satellite and political. But there's more than just maps. There are articles about population, language, religion, greetings, gestures, family, diet and eating, social life, recreation, holidays and celebrations, commerce, arts, music, libraries and museums, government, economy, transport and communication, education, health and welfare. There's even a selection of world music.

The 3D World Atlas has three main globes – environmental, physical and political – which are created from composite satellite images, a format sufficiently different to encourage activities. There's also a lot of statistical data, though some may now be out of date, as this is a fairly elderly product.

Also recommended in general terms

by BECTa and thought to be extremely useful in many curriculum areas is a subscription to a newspaper on CD-ROM. This isn't likely to be a home purchase, but schools should consider it and perhaps *The Times* and *The Sunday Times* on CD-ROM is the best buy, offering extensive world coverage and carrying authority.

Another good purchase for schools would be a resource bank of images, and an excellent one is *MasterClips 202,000.* It includes lots of clip-art, photographs, Web art, 3D images and fonts. Useful for social and history studies is *Frith's Photographic Directory,* which contains 3,500 vintage photos of Great Britain and Ireland, covering 1,460 cities, towns and villages. BECTa recommends the *ClickArt 125,000 Image Pak.* For the home user, the cut-down *10,000 ClickArt* package is now included as part ⇨

PCs make ideal teachers when combined with the right software, especially when it supports the National Curriculum. This month we help you find the best educational packages

of *The Family Pack* from Broderbund, which features games (notably *Myst*) as well as educational packages such as *Just Grandma and Me* and utilities like *Print Shop Deluxe*.

What to look for

One thing to which special attention should be paid is the accuracy of the content. It should be up to date, so check to see when the software was first released. This is especially necessary with budget titles.

It's also worth checking to see if there is a related Web site from which the latest information can be downloaded, as is the case with both *Encarta* and *The*

BECTa

On 14th January 1998, at the British Education and Training Technology (BETT) Exhibition in London, David Blunkett, the Secretary of State for Education and Employment, announced that the National Council for Educational Technology (NCET) would be given a new remit and would be renamed the British Educational Communications and Technology Agency (BECTa). Its job would be to support the Department For Education and Employment (DfEE) objectives, and develop and run the National Grid for Learning – essentially a plan to integrate libraries, museums, universities, and galleries, as well as Britain's 32,000 schools, adult education establishments and so on.

Europress Family Encyclopedia.

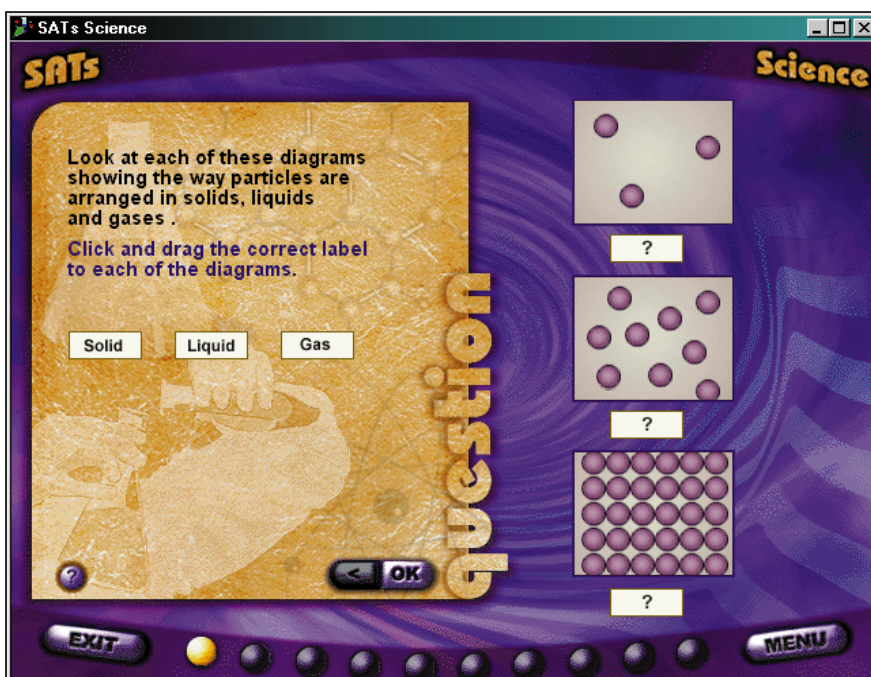A program developed to tie in with the National Curriculum is also a good

idea but, as most titles aren't developed in the UK, your choice is fairly limited. *My Personal Tutor* from Microsoft doesn't display any links to a Key Stage on the packaging, but is a good introduction to reading and maths for children aged up to seven years. Dorling Kindersley also has a range of titles ideal for the

Left: GSCE (GSP): one of several series of GCSE revision aids available, this one benefits from having TV personality Sarah Greene as host. **Bottom left:** Revision aid for the SATs test, hitherto an area neglected by software.

This software is specifically designed to improve your grades!

- *reveals how examiners go about marking*
- *highlights your strengths and weaknesses*
- *encourages you to rehearse, improve and practise your exam technique*
- *offers tips on how to get organised for revision and how to deal with exam-time stress*

Click the arrow to go on

SCIENCE
TOPICS COVERED
LIKELY OVERALL GRADE
YOUR TARGET GRADE

SATs Science

SATs **Science**

Look at each of these diagrams showing the way particles are arranged in solids, liquids and gases .

Click and drag the correct label to each of the diagrams.

Solid Liquid Gas

question

?
?
?

EXIT OK MENU

Internet sites

GCSE Answers
www.gcse.com/
GCSE Answers is where you'll find answers to many of your problems with GCSE English and GCSE Mathematics.

The Internet Public Library
www.ipl.org/
Books, newspapers, magazines…just like a real library, but nobody goes 'Shhhhhh'.

NISS Education
www.niss.ac.uk/education/
This is the place to go for UK educational links, including Ofsted school inspection reports, school and college performance tables, the National Curriculum, directories of academic institutions, UCAS advice for prospective students, plus many other education resources.

Department of Education and Employment
www.dfee.gov.uk/
A good place to begin to gather information on the requirements of the National Curriculum and recommended software.

younger age range. *The Jolly Post Office* and *The Jolly Postman's Party*, based on the popular books by Janet and Allan Ahlberg, are designed to teach letters and numbers in a fun, interactive way for Key Stage 1.

A CD-ROM should also suit the reading age of the children using it. This not only applies to the content, but to the
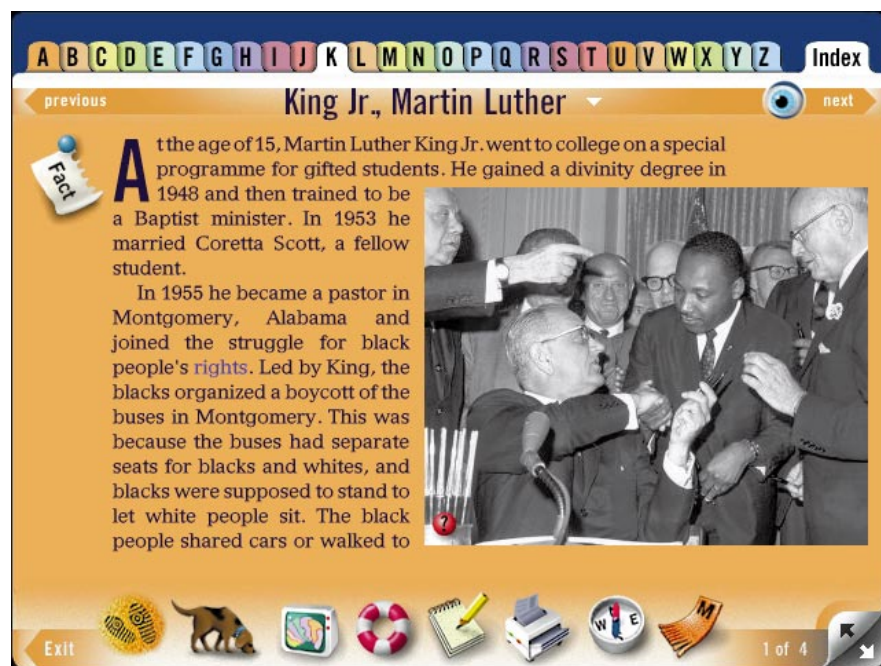
Top: The Kids Multimedia Encyclopedia: very resource-hungry and a little out of date but designed especially for children.
Bottom: Microsoft World Atlas: Microsoft takes over the world with this BECTa-recommended atlas.

instructions for using the software. Flexible searching is also important; a 'sounds-like' feature is to be preferred over the demand for accurate spelling.

Curricular subjects

You can find lots of software to suit each of the curricular subjects. We don't have the space to look at even a few subjects in great depth. Although English is lacking in good school software – there's little or nothing to assist in group analysis of a text, for example – there are abundant animated storybooks for younger children and Shakespeare is well served. There are several collections of his complete works, such as the budget-priced

Other products

The Times and Sunday Times
News Multimedia:
0171 782 3982
www.newsmultimedia.co.uk/

Microsoft Office Professional 97
Microsoft:
0870 6010100
www.microsoft.com/uk/default.asp

Clickart 125,000 Image Pack
Broderbund:
01784 486916
www.broderbund.com/

MasterClips 303,000
IMSI:
0181 581 2000
www.imsiuk.co.uk/
£59.99

Friths
Channel Marketmakers:
01703 814142
www.cmm1.com
£49.95

Family Pack
Broderbund:
01784 486916
www.broderbund.com/
£49.99

The Complete Works of William Shakespeare from Focus, and BECTa recommends *Romeo and Juliet* in the on-going series from the BBC. This CD-ROM combines the text of the play along with extracts from the BBC drama. Among the available titles are *Macbeth, Julius Caesar*, and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. BECTa also recommends *Storybook Weaver Deluxe* to assist children develop creative writing skills. It contains over 1,000 images to trigger the imagination and inspire storylines.

To take another subject at random, there are some excellent history titles available, especially concerning World War II. *History of the World 2.0* from DK is an ambitious title which provides bite-sized chunks of history in a colourful and interesting way. YITM has also produced several CD-ROMs based on the popular and long-running educational TV series *How We Used To Live*. These explore the Victorian period and Britain in the years before WWII.

Modern Languages has masses of software to choose from, though not all is aimed specifically at children. *Le Français Interactif* is based on the best-

Children's software

Children's software compared

Title	Introducing French	Le Français Interactif	Romeo and Juliet	Jolly Postman's Party	Jolly Post Office	History of the World v.2	Test For Success Science, Maths, Geography	GCSE Revise: Biology, Chemistry, Physics, Maths, Geography	Europress Family Encyclopedia 98
Product									
Supplier	Anglia Multimedia	Attica	BBC	Dorling Kindersley	Dorling Kindersley	Dorling Kindersley	Dorling Kindersley	Dorling Kindersley	Europress
Contact number	0500 600191	01865 791346	0414 306 3455	0171 836 5411	0171 836 5411	0171 836 5411	0171 836 5411	0171 836 5411	01625 855000
Price	£19.99	£92.83	£88.12	£19.99	£19.99	£39.99	£19.99	£19.99	£39.99
Year published	1998	1995	1995	1997	1997	1998	1998	1998	1998
Features									
National Curriculum subject	Modern Languages	Modern Languages	English	Maths, English	Maths, English	History	Science, Maths, Geography	Science, Maths, Geography	Cross Curricular
Key Stage	2	3	3/4	1	1	3/4	3	4	All
Net site link	○	○	○	●	●	●	○	○	●
BECTa recommended *	○	○	●	○	○	○	○	○	●
On-screen help	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Alternative routes through the material	●	○	●	●	●	●	n/a	n/a	●
Index	○	●	●	○	○	●	n/a	n/a	●
Contents menu	●	○	○	○	○	●	●	n/a	●
Print and save selected material?	●	○	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Ratings									
Ease of use	★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★
Features	★★★	★★★★	★★★★	★★★★	★★★★	★★★★	★★★	★★★	★★★★★
Value for money	★★★	★★	★★★★	★★★★	★★★★	★★★★	★★★★	★★★★	★★★★★
Overall	★★★★	★★★	★★★★	★★★★	★★★★	★★★★	★★★★	★★★★	★★★★★
Internet address	www.anglia.co.uk/anglia/index.html	attica.com		www.dk.com	www.dk.com	www.dk.com	www.dk.com	www.dk.com	www.europress.co.uk

*Based on preview list at time of writing. ○ No ● Yes. ★ = Poor ★★ = Below average ★★★ = Average ★★★★ = Good ★★★★★ = Excellent.

History of the World v.2: bite-sized chunks of information served in several ways keeps interest alive.

selling French course *Advantage,* used in many schools, and was developed in association with Heinemann Educational. It is designed for children (it relates to Key Stage Three in the National Curriculum) and combines language instruction, exercises and games, with lots of video and native speakers to watch and copy. The downside is its price. Far more economical is *Introducing French* (and its sibling *Introducing German*) for Key Stage 2. The CD takes the child to magic lands – Adventure Island, Musical Jungle and so on – to teach over 1,000 vocabulary items.

Revision software

Older children will welcome revision aids for their SATs (Standard Assessment Tests) and GCSEs. The *SATs* series from Europress contain hundreds of questions provided by teachers, heads of department and even a chief examiner. Test papers are randomly created from this database of questions and children can work in either Test Mode or

	GCSE: Maths, English, Physics, Chemistry	SATS: Maths (7), Maths (11), English (7), Science (11)	Complete Works of William Shakespeare	GCSE: English, Maths, Science, French, German	The Kids Multimedia Encyclopedia	The British Multimedia Encyclopedia	Storybook Weaver Deluxe	Encarta	Encarta World Atlas	My Personal Tutor	How We Used To Live 1936-1953
	Europress	Europress	Focus	GSP	GSP	GSP	Learning Company	Microsoft	Microsoft	Microsoft	Granada Learning
	01625 855000	01625 855000	01889 570156	01480 496666	01480 496666	01480 496666	0181 246 4000	0870 0010100	0870 0010100	0870 0010100	0161 6274 469
	£19.99	£19.99	£9.99	£19.95	£19.95	£19.95	£9.99	£79.99	£59.99	£29.99	£59.99
	1997	1998	1995	1998	1996	1996	1994	1997	1997	1998	1997
	Maths, English, Physics	Maths, English, Science	English	English, Maths, Science, French, German	Cross Curricular	Cross Curricular	English	Cross Curricular	Geography	Maths, English	History
	3 to GCSE		3/4	3 to GCSE	2/3	all	2	All	All	1	2
	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	●	●	●	○
	○	○	○	○	○	○	●	●	●	○	○
	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
	n/a	○	○	n/a	●	●	●	●	●	●	○
	n/a	○	●	n/a		●	n/a	●	●	○	○
	n/a	○	●	●	●	●	n/a	●	●	●	○
	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★	★★★★
	★★★★	★★★★★	★★★	★★★★	★★★★	★★★★	★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★	★★★★
	★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★	★★★★	★★★★	★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★	★★★★
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	www.europress.co.uk	www.europress.co.uk	users.aol.com/focusmm	www.gspltd.co.uk/	www.gspltd.co.uk/	www.gspltd.co.uk/	199.103.160.103/default.htm	www.microsoft.com/uk/default.asp	www.microsoft.com/uk/default.asp	www.microsoft.com/uk/default.asp	www.yitm.com/

Tutorial Mode, the latter providing advice when the student gives an incorrect answer. So far the subjects covered include Maths and Science. The same age group is targeted by Dorling Kindersley's *Test for Success* series. A picture of TV personality Carol Vorderman graces the boxes, along with her recommendation. The series covers geography, science and maths.

Europress also has a series of titles for students taking their GCSEs. The subjects covered include Maths, English, Physics and Chemistry. Another series of revision aids comes from GSP, which has just launched a series of titles written by examiners for this year's examinations which feature subject keynotes and hints and tips provided by TV personality Sarah Greene.

There's also a series called *GCSE Revise* from Dorling Kindersley which covers biology, chemistry, physics, maths and geography.

Overall, there is no shortage of educational packages and the software is getting better all the time.

BEST BUY · BEST BUY · BEST BUY · WHAT PC?

It isn't really possible to select a single title as a Best Buy, although for older children the Best Buy for all curricular subjects would be an encyclopaedia. Encarta is excellent and as a family encyclopaedia it probably has no equal, being suitable for adults as well as children. But for an encyclopaedia specifically for use by children, the Best Buy has to be the BECTa choice, namely the Europress Family Encyclopaedia 1998. It is entertaining to use, provides a variety of ways to access the information, and is written in a language children will more readily understand as compared to Encarta.

RECOMMENDED · RECOMMENDED · WHAT PC?

Every title discussed in this feature is topnotch in its own way, so every one of them is strongly recommended but, if forced to single out any titles for special comment, we'd plump for the SATs titles from Europress. One reason is that there are plenty of GSCE revision aids, but the SATs, important to a child's progress through school, have been neglected. The SATs titles are therefore useful for both home and school use and we liked the Test Mode and Tutorial Mode.

Paul Begg