

19 Kids' Stuff

You have a computer. You have a kid (or two, or...). They go together perfectly when you get just the right software. Good programs are entertaining and often informative even when they're not primarily educational. The computer is infinitely patient and won't have to swallow back a frustrated sigh when asked to read the same story, or play the same game, for the umpteenth time in a single week. And if you follow a few simple guidelines to protect the hardware and your own "grown-up" software and files, the whole family can happily share the computer.

That's what this chapter's all about. You'll find lots of software covered here, including games and educational software for the pre-high school crowd.

Contributors

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Carolyn Said (CS), senior news editor for *MacWEEK*, collaborated on her reviews with her son B.B. and their friends.

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Kids and Computers

When it comes to your kids and your computer, you have two goals that are occasionally at cross-purposes: Get the kids interested, and keep the computer (and your information) safe!

Issues

(SZA)

How old is old enough? I'm not suggesting that if a child doesn't start early enough on a computer, he'll forever lag behind his peers educationally. Nor am I recommending that you get a computer specifically for a young child. But if you have, or you're getting, a Mac, and you happen to also have a child, you'll find that most three-year-olds have the motor skills necessary for pointing and clicking, and the cognitive skills to know that what they're doing with the mouse is affecting what's happening on the screen. Two-and-a-half isn't too early to let them play with the simplest of programs; although purposefully maneuvering a mouse and using its button is beyond many two-year-olds, most can be taught to press one key at a time to get some feedback from the screen.

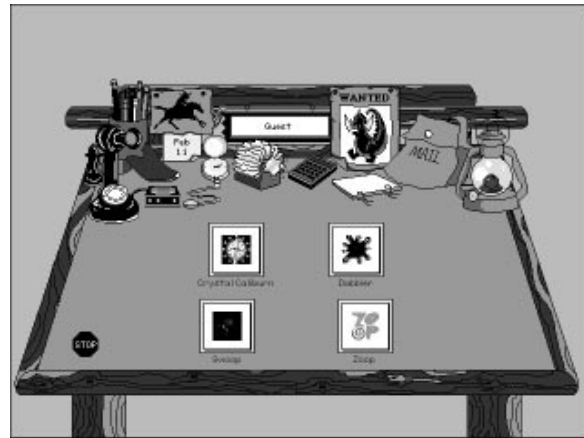
The care and not feeding of a computer. The computer area should be taboo for certain combinations—such as kids and food, or kids and drink. The potential problem with liquids is probably obvious, but cookie crumbs can sift down into the keyboard, too.

The youngest kids need to be taught that while the computer is something you can play on, it is *not* a toy, and needs to be treated gently—the same way you might teach a young one to press piano keys one at a time and not just bang away at it.

Data protection. Because few families can afford multiple computers, it's important to keep your grown-up stuff from being messed up by the youngsters in the family. For older kids, it's a simple matter of making some folders off-limits. But for the younger ones, who behind your back might accidentally move from a program to the desktop, and then have fun dragging lots of little pictures into the cute little garbage can, you need to set up a “fire wall” (as it's called in big business). There are several approaches, with different levels of security:

- Use the General Controls control panel settings to lock the System Folder and your Applications folder when the kids use the machine. You can even store your documents inside a subfolder in the Applications folder to protect them.

- If your child isn't an explorer, setting up the Launcher control panel with her program icons in it, and keeping other desktop folders closed, is probably sufficient protection against software accidents.
- Consider using **At Ease** (\$50, Apple), which replaces the Finder with a giant folder with buttons for launching programs; you can get back to the desktop only with the proper password.
- Edmark's **KidDesk** (\$30) acts like At Ease in that you get launching icons for selected programs and a password-protected desktop, but it's aimed at kids, providing a friendlier screen as home base. You can choose from several desk styles; each comes with a collection of useful little gadgets such as a calendar, note pad, and calculator—and even a private mail system that sends messages to the desks of other family members! Application icons appear on the desk surface, and the only way to access the real desktop is through a password.



One of KidDesk's desktops. The accessories work—even clicking on the lamp dims or brightens the screen.

- **Launch Pad** (\$30) from Berkeley Systems goes beyond just providing a password-protected special desktop. The metaphor here is that of a car; each family member has his own ignition key and chooses the “scenery” for his background. Application icons appear on the dashboard, but can be dragged anywhere on the screen. Other dashboard items, such as a clock and calculator, also work. The extraspecial features of Launch Pad, though, are the ones that interrupt any application's Print and Save commands so the child is routed to simpler dialogs and special folders. (Saved documents are accessed through the car's glove compartment!) There's even a special kids' trash can that saves items for a week before actually deleting them.



Educational? Hey, for a four-year-old, *everything* is educational. So, although we cover educational software later in this chapter—things that foster specific learning skills or cover particular subject areas for young children—don't get hung up on educational software just because you're embarrassed to admit you're letting a preschooler *play* on a \$2,500 machine. There's nothing wrong with playing; in fact, many psychologists will tell you that playing is a child's job.

Not Made For Kids

(SZA)

There are lots of programs not specifically designed for kids that make great kids' software nonetheless. A "programmable" screensaver, for instance, is a perfect little activity for the nine-to-twelve set. The basics of a "grown-up" paint program or word processor are well within the capabilities of many preteens. Both these groups can also doodle for hours with interface components, changing the desktop backgrounds and window colors; and if you have a program such as Dubl-Click's ClickChange (see Chapter 13), that's all the more items to play with (so long as you can trust the kids not to mess with your files, and can put up with "awesome" color combos on your desktop).

Ejecting CDs. Even young kids catch on quickly—before you know it, they'll be clicking their way out of a program and getting the CD out of the drive. But if they do it incorrectly, leaving the ghost icon of the CD on the desktop, they'll be asked to insert the CD at annoying intervals. First, make sure your child knows how to quit out



Spit It Out!

Make an alias of the Trash and edit its icon to create a CD-eject icon.

of every program—"officially," not just by clicking on the exposed desktop if it's available. Next, set up a way to eject the CD properly. Unfortunately, one of the "proper" ways is to drag it to the Trash—not a habit you want the little ones to get into. So, make an alias of the Trash, change its icon to something more appropriate, and teach the kids to use it for ejecting CDs. (See Chapter 3 for more information about creating and using aliases.)



Equipment

(SZA)

Where to put the computer. Not many families buy a computer *just* for the kids, and even fewer buy separate ones for them. So, most setups are centrally located in a family room or living room where everyone can access it.

But if you do have a "kids" computer, I'm adamantly against putting it in a child's room (I wouldn't put a TV in there, either). I prefer to draw my kids out of their rooms rather than give them more excuses to shut their doors on the rest of the family, especially now that they're teenagers. For the youngest children, you'll want the computer more centrally located, since they both need help and always want to share the experience ("Look, mom!") anyway.

The CD-ROM explosion. If you have a computer and a kid, you need a CD-ROM drive. That's all there is to it. If your Mac didn't come with one, get one. All the best kid stuff is on CD-ROM; good reference material for older kids (through college!) is also on CD-ROMs.



Quiet! To have kids, software, and sanity all at the same time, you need earphones; standard Walkman-style work just fine. When you've heard "Find the letter A" in a cloying tone for the umpteenth time, or had to listen to preschool background music for hours on end, you'll be glad to spend a few dollars on sound insulation. (You'll also appreciate it if you have older kids, or a spouse, who's into noisy games.)

Books and Activities

Not all kids' software is hard-core educational—that is, specifically designed to teach a particular skill; there are plenty of titles that foster imagination and thinking just through the enjoyment of an activity.

Interactive Storybooks

Living Books (Anita Maining). If you have young children, Living Books from Brøderbund Software are a must; they set the standard for interactive CD books. They're beautifully produced, and faithful to the original titles (a paperback version of each book is included).

The original package, Mercer Mayer's **Just Grandma and Me** (\$40) still holds its own as one of the best for the three-to-six set. It captures the playfulness of the book and adds to it, following Little Critter's day at the beach with his grandmother.

The longer, wordier text of Marc Brown's **Arthur's Teacher Trouble** (\$50) can hold some three-to-fives, but is better suited to slightly older kids. Poor Arthur is stuck with a demanding teacher (Mr. Ratburn), a list of words to memorize for a spelling contest, and an irrepressible little sister who won't let him forget how much he has to study. But silliness abounds, too: Click and a dragon toy spits fire, the fire extinguisher goes berserk, and the little sister falls off the bed in the midst of taunting Arthur.

Discis Book series (Dan Ruby/Twyla Ruby). Discis Knowledge Research has a collection of titles (\$30 to \$40) designed for kids over six, including classics such as **Aesop's Fables** and **The Tale of Peter Rabbit**, as well as contemporary titles such as **Scary Poems for Rotten Kids**. With color illustrations, dramatic narration, music, and sound effects, they provide a rich learning experience for beginning readers. But they don't include animation, so although they're useful for teaching vocabulary and spelling, they have limited appeal for kids who can already read.

Puddle Books (SZA). I used only one book in Davidson's Puddle Book series—**A Day at the Beach with the Fuzzooly Family**—but it's so superb that I recommend you get it and every other title in the line (\$20 each). These volumes use a variation on the usual interactive book approach: Every page is linked to another screen that fleshes out a particular part of the story with animations and games. So, you get to help Pop carry all the stuff down to the beach when the rest of the family leaves him at the car; in another scene, you can build sand castles. And the scenes and dialog change slightly each time you visit!



Building sand castles with the Fuzzooly kids.

Quick Takes (Cindy Luker). Here're three more storybooks worth reading:

- **The Escape of Marvin the Ape** (\$20, T/Maker) puts the book of the same name on CD, provides minimal but effective animation, and lets a child wander into coloring and matching activities during the course of the imaginative story.
- **Baba Yaga and the Magic Geese** (\$40, Davidson) brings the Russian folktale witch, Baba Yaga, to life in a tale about carelessness and its consequences. Lots of animation, good sound effects, music, and songs add up to a great experience. (Note that the haunted woods may be a little *too* haunted for timid three- to five-year-olds).
- **Four Footed Friends** (\$20, T/Maker) is charming, with lots of little extra activities, but they're so hard to get that a young child will probably need help every time. There are also some confusing things for the young set, such as offering American and British spelling variations (armor/armour)—as if American spelling weren't difficult enough!

Creative Endeavors

Kid Pix (SZA). From a black-and-white shareware program to a full-color multiactivity CD, **Kid Pix Studio** (\$50, Brøderbund) has come a long way—and it's a must-have for ages three to 12. Activities include a fun paint program that uses tools that have plenty of weird options and make strange noises, a puppet show where pressing different keys makes various body parts move, and a stamp-your-own scene builder where the stamps are animated. This will hold any child's interest for a very long time.

Creative writing (CS). Children can make up stories and illustrate them with MECC's **Storybook Weaver** and **My Own Stories** (\$35 each). The programs provide elementary word processing and hundreds of images and background scenes, as well as dozens of sounds. *Storybook Weaver* draws its images (knights, trolls, treasure chests) from folklore; *My Own Stories* offers contemporary symbols (shopping malls, Frisbees, fire trucks, and so on).



Flying Colors (SZA). Davidson's **Flying Colors** (\$40) is the perfect dabbling paint program for about seven years on up (up to adulthood). Choose backgrounds ranging from a dungeon to a country glade to a barren planet. Complete the picture with paint tools and a wide variety of stamps that can be resized and reversed. But what puts this package ahead of the rest is the "cycling color" option that adds a dash of pseudo-animation to any item. With candle flames or campfires cycling through yellows and oranges, for instance, you get flickering flames; the contents of laboratory bottles bubble ominously through greens and blues; and you can get twinkling stars and other out-of-this-world effects for your planetary pictures.



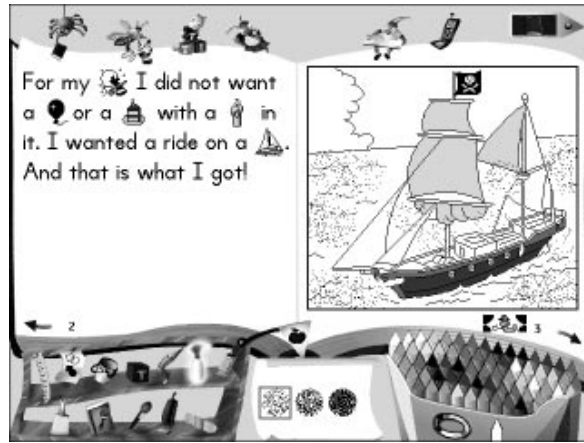
One of the scenes you can build in Flying Colors; many of the items here are sparkling on the screen.

Quick takes (SZA). Wait! There's more:

- Take a paint program, add animation and sound, combine it with a screensaver—and you get Bit Jugglers' **Kids World** (\$30). It may sound complicated, but it's a breeze to use and can offer endless fascination to the ten-and-up gang.
- **Print Shop Deluxe CD Ensemble** (\$80, Brøderbund) is a classic that keeps growing in capabilities. Create and print greeting cards, posters, calendars, certificates—just about anything, within a simple interface. This CD version includes more than 1,000 pieces of clip art and a few dozen fonts, too. Terrific—and not just for kids, either.
- **Kid Works Deluxe** (\$60, Davidson) is mildly disappointing but still worthwhile. Write your story on one side, illustrate it on the other, occasionally using "stickers" instead of words. It's a confusing design for the younger end of the four-to-nine target age range; the stickers, for instance, are presented in small groups and you

have to open a sticker book to change the group. For the older half of the recommended age range, this program is very close to being very good.

Each title in the **Imagination Express** series (\$23 each, Edmark) provides a theme (ocean, neighborhood, castle, and so on) and related pictures and information for a child to write a story about. The approach is wonderful, but way too complicated for the lower half of the recommended kindergarten-through-eighth-grade range. It would be great in a classroom where a project could be worked on over a period of months, but probably wouldn't work very well at home.



Use Kid Works Deluxe to create an illustrated storybook.

Fun Stuff

Thinkin' Things (SZA). Edmark offers three **Thinkin' Things Collections**, numbered 1 through 3 for age groups three to seven, six to 11, and eight to 13. They're all terrific CDs that offer four or five interesting activities that foster such important learning areas as critical thinking skills, memory, problem solving, logic, and spatial dexterity. Sounds like heavy-duty stuff, but the kids will never notice because they'll be enjoying themselves too much.

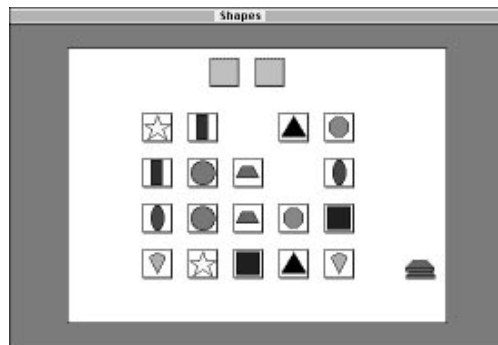
Places to go, things to do (CS). Brøderbund offers three packages (\$35 each) that let your child just wander around and get involved in various activities; any one of these packages would make an excellent first introduction to the Mac. **The Playhouse** and **The Backyard** are for ages three to six, while **The Treehouse** is for the five-to-eight crowd.

Each program is chock full of things to do. Clicking around *The Treehouse* turns up plenty of interesting reactions: Clouds change shape and the opossums and birds can be fed. Players pick an opossum playmate with whom to explore a bevy of activities, such as a musical maze, a theater where you make up silly sentences, and a counting game. *The Playhouse* features a clock that teaches how to tell time, an ABC book, and a counting board game. *The Backyard* offers activities that teach animal habitats, mapping and directional skills, strategy, and logic.



Two duds (SZA). Kids Count Entertainment's first title, **Jack's House** (\$40), is a disappointing effort. The sound and graphics are fine, but the approach is frequently flawed. You click your way around Jack's house, but some of the most tempting objects, such as a half-opened drawer, do nothing. Click on the wooden blocks, and they pile up while being counted—but the letters and numbers on the face of each block don't match the number being spoken, a *big* educational no-no for the preschool set. Move outside, and you'll find a frustrating garden that has some rigid rules about what you can do, and in what order. In all, wait for the second version of this one.

Great Wave's **KidsTime** (\$50) was great when it came out about ten years ago, but it hasn't changed much except that it's in color now. It's an uneven collection of activities, some suitable for three-year-olds, and others for ten-to-twelves. It runs in a window instead of taking over the screen and has cheesy, minimal animation. Yuck.



A typical screen from KidsTime, with its unappealing, outdated graphics.

Voyager's voyages (Susan McCallister/Connie Guglielmo). Two colorful CDs from The Voyager Company will lead your kids on adventures through worlds beautifully conceived by their creators.

Peggy Weil's **A Silly Noisy House** (\$35) is an imaginative adventure designed for three-year-olds and up. The game begins with a cross section of a large house: Just click on a room to zoom in. Each room is loaded with objects that, as promised, do silly, noisy things: A rocking horse makes galloping sounds; a pie erupts with blackbirds as you hear *Sing a Song of Sixpence*. Some objects are unpredictable, responding to clicks in different ways at different times.

Rodney's Wonder Window (\$40), created by artist Rodney Alan Greenblatt, provides 24 interactive episodes filled with animations and sounds—and you don't have to be a kid to enjoy it. It's wacky, weird, wild, and fun: Order "Data Shorts" in your favorite fabric (including plaid, knotty pine, and X-ray); take a trip to the "Probe and Poke Pet Shop"; watch a movie of Chip and Peg's adventures in ShapeLand.

Educational Software

Let us just repeat this note: *Everything* is educational for a young child, and there's nothing wrong with playing. But when you want to provide experience in specific learning areas, there's lots to choose from.

Reading and Math

Reader Rabbit (SZA). Reader Rabbit was one of the first educational games on the Mac. It has been continually upgraded and improved, and—as suits its namesake—has multiplied into many products. Now on CD, **Reader Rabbit Deluxe 1** (ages three to six), **2** (ages five to eight), and **3** (ages six to nine) concentrate on building reading skills with simple but colorful and fun activities. Even within each package (\$50 each), you can set the skill level that's appropriate for your child—and change it as your child grows. So, a three-year-old can play Word Train concentrating on sounds that words begin with, but a year later can work with ending sounds, or even vowel sounds in the middle. You can't go wrong with this series.

ReadingMaze (SZA). **ReadingMaze** (\$50, Great Wave) is aimed at the three-to-eight classroom crowd and should be rated AA: absolutely awful. With a goal of finding an object in a multi-room house, you click on the target and hear the word “bull.” Find the room with the bull, click on it again, hear the word “bull”—and get switched to a screen with the word “ladder” on one side and the letters “l”, “d”, and “b” on the other. It's bad enough that the first step has nothing to do with the second conceptually, and that the sounds you hear have nothing to do with the letters you look at, but then you can click on a wrong answer until the end of eternity, and you get no feedback or help.



Super Solvers OutNumbered! (Nancy Dunn). My eight-year-old installed **Super Solvers OutNumbered!** (\$45) himself and started playing without one look at the instruction booklet. It's a great game that combines arcade-style action and logical problem-solving, and unlike many educational games, it induces you to drill by making that a prerequisite for more play. The problems are interesting—more like puzzles than drills—and there's even an on-screen calculator to help make sure the focus is on arithmetic. It's from The Learning Company, for ages seven to ten.

Stradiwackius (Cindy Luker). One of T/Maker's **VroomBooks** titles, **Stradiwackius** (\$20) takes a musical approach to working with numbers (and learning about musical instruments at the same time). It has plenty of music, charming graphics, and a few little activities, such as painting the various instruments. But there's a dubious educational approach: You get a screen, for instance, that says (both in print and in

voice-over) “Four tiny violins...”. Using the word instead of the numeral is not the right approach for the preschool set—and there’s only a single violin at the bottom of the screen!

Quick takes (SZA). Here’s a quick look at a few other packages:

- In **Math Rabbit** (\$50, The Learning Company), the famous Reader Rabbit changes his subject area without losing any of his charm or effectiveness. For ages four to seven.
- **NumberMaze**, **Decimal & Fraction Maze**, and **Kid’sMath** (\$50 each, Great Wave) are all creaking with age. They’re on floppies, so there’s not much room for good graphics or animation, or decent sound. And some of the design is downright clunky, such as a plain dialog box with “Good” printed in it as a reward for the right answer—and didn’t it occur to someone that if a child can’t count to six successfully, she probably won’t be able to read the dialog “Please try again”?
- Knowledge Adventure has three titles in its **Jump Start** series: **Preschool**, **Kindergarten**, and (predictably) **First Grade**. Each offers a collection of activities that help develop necessary learning skills, starting with counting, letter and number recognition, shape identification, and the concepts of “same” and “different.” By the time you’re in the First Grade package, you’ve progressed to science concepts, language arts basics, and telling time.



Geography, History, and Social Studies

Carmen Sandiego series (SZA/Mary Toth). The software program that spawned a TV Series—Brøderbund’s **Where In The World is Carmen Sandiego?**—also includes titles that take Carmen (and your kids) to Europe, through the U.S.A., and even into space. You learn about geography and history as you track Carmen and her band of thieves. You have to collect enough clues to get an arrest warrant and find the suspect, using information offered by witnesses and informants. If you find that the suspect stole something from Francisco Pizarro, you’d have to travel to 16th-century Peru—and if you didn’t just happen to know that, you’d be able to look it up in the standard reference book that comes with the software. (Depending on the package, you might get a paperback edition of the *World Almanac and Book of Facts*, *Fodor’s U.S.A.* travel guide, the *New American Desk Encyclopedia*, or *What Happened When*.) Titles range from \$40 to \$60, with those still available on floppy disks being on the lower end of the range.

And, for the jealous younger sibling, there’s **Carmen Sandiego, Junior Detective** (\$40), a program aimed at five- to eight-year-olds with minimal or no reading skills. A “case” is in a single country, the clues are all visual, and there’s plenty of on-line help at hand.

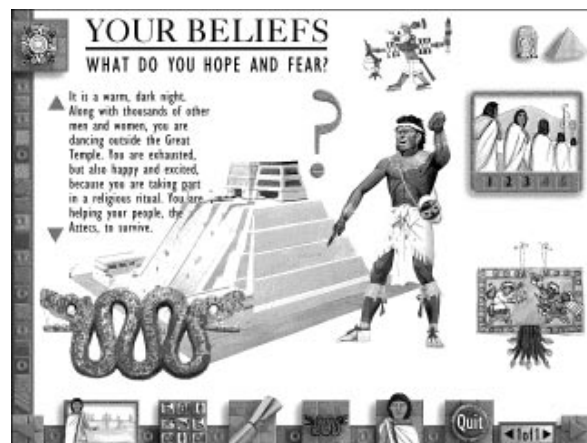
MECC's Trail books (CS). MECC has taken to heart the saying, "The journey is the reward." The company offers educational games for ages ten to adult in which players "travel" a route packed with adventures, information, and colorful characters.

In **The Oregon Trail** (\$60), players follow the covered wagon route pioneers trekked in 1848 from Missouri to Oregon's Willamette Valley. After "stocking up" on supplies, they head west, dealing with difficulties such as river crossings and wagon breakdowns as well as day-to-day decisions such as how much food to consume. Players can stop along the way to trade, buy supplies, or hunt. Top-notch edutainment, with geographical and historical information skillfully interwoven throughout.

The Amazon Trail (\$60) is a canoe trek up the Amazon River. The scenario: A mysterious disease has afflicted a hidden Inca village and a secret medicinal plant hidden in the rain forest is the villagers' only hope for salvation. You must find the plant and then the people, along the way stocking up on other items the Inca king might desire. The trip weaves in and out of time, allowing the traveler to meet up with explorers, scientists, and others who shaped the development of the Amazon. The color animations are absolutely stunning, and digitized photographs and speech and authentic South American music provide nice touches of realism.

Headline Harry (CS). In addition to learning U.S. geography, players get the lowdown on important historical events and pick up some news-gathering skills from **Headline Harry** (\$60, from Davidson for ages ten and up). It pairs the player with ace reporter Harry, who's racing to scoop the competition on important news stories circa 1950 to 1990.

How Would You Survive? (Cindy Luker) Grolier's **How Would You Survive?** (\$35) is a superb package based on the book of the same name. Although the title might imply some sort of action adventure, it actually covers the daily life of three ancient cultures: Aztec, Egyptian, and Viking. You can see how women were treated, what children did, what kinds of foods were eaten, and what monetary systems were used. You can explore a single culture in depth, or go back and forth and compare certain facets of each society. There's no built-in game here, but that's no drawback: It's a wonderful reference book brought to life that will fascinate the ten-to-fifteen age group.

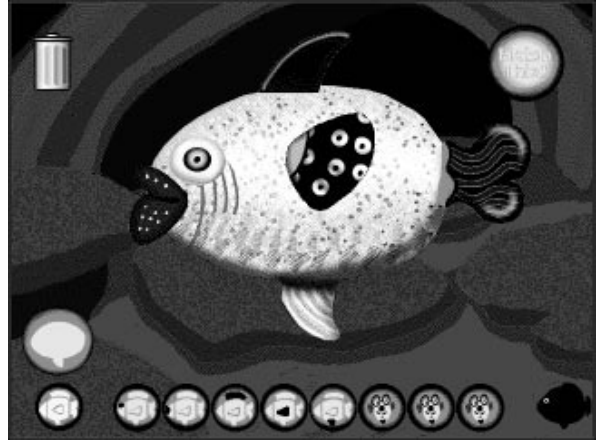


Unearth ancient civilizations in How Would You Survive?

Science

(SZA)

Explorers. Two finely crafted pieces of software come in a single package from Compton's New Media: **Zoo Explorers** and **Ocean Explorers** (\$60). They present a plethora of information in an easy-to-understand format that young kids (three to eight) will return to again and again. From the bright cartoon main screens, you can get a QuickTime movie of the animal you click on or move to a related activity. The picture here, for instance, shows a fishy game—you build a fish by selecting from wildly colored component parts. Both these titles—which come in a double package—are a joy to behold.



The build-a-fish activity is just one of the many fun things inside the ultra-informative Ocean Explorers CD.

What's the Secret. The **What's the Secret** series (\$40 each), from 3M Learning Software, is based on Public Television's Newton's Apple show, and it lives up to both its pedigree and your highest expectations. The first volume covers things as diverse as the world of bees and the human heart; the second includes things such as how glue works and cockroaches. Both present tons of information in varied forms, including QuickTime clips from the TV show. There are some minor activities, but there's no game approach; since the package is aimed at seventh graders and higher, that's not a problem. Kids are encouraged to keep wandering around: There are 45 "patches"—like scout merit badges—scattered through the material that are meant to be collected in a special knapsack.

Quick takes. Just a few more:

- **Sammy's Science House** (\$35, Edmark) provides a mild introduction to science skills for ages two to five. Activities revolve around weather, observation, sorting, and sequencing.
- Why do I sneeze, and what happens to the food I eat, and why do I get the hiccups, and why don't haircuts hurt? These questions and more are answered in **What is a Bellybutton?** (\$35, IVI Publishing), a gentle animated book about a child's bodily functions that includes straight, simple answers, and simple activities for ages three to eight.

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