

Teaching computer skills at an early age
Computer training benefits students for life
By Mary E. Hart

These days, it seems that kids know more about computers than their parents do. But, could you imagine that a three or four-year old could turn on a computer; use the mouse to open a game or a Web browser, and then use that same mouse to click on PBSkids.org and then click on Sesame Street to play various Elmo and Big Bird games? This is happening far more often than you'd think, as children are introduced to computers by their parents, and now even through their schools. Learning how to use a computer early will help a child throughout school, and even in working life down the road.

"In order to fully understand a computer, students need to know the correct terms and call a monitor a monitor; a keyboard a keyboard, and know the words for the enter key and the space bar," says Shirley Coutu, Computer Teacher at Saint Michael School in Andover, where a computer curriculum is taught to students starting in kindergarten on up. For the kindergarteners, the purpose of the course is to teach them the appropriate computer terms, introduce how to use the keyboard and mouse, and practice grade-level skills using software. In the second half of the school year, students come to the computer lab once a week for 25 minutes to work with Coutu. For the first five to 10 minutes, students sit in front of Coutu's computer to listen and watch while the lesson is explained and the software is demonstrated. Then, each student sits at one of the 26 computers in the lab and works independently. With computers prevalent in many homes, it makes sense that most of the students have previously used computers. However, says Coutu, "many of the students are missing mouse skills, so we help teach them how to properly use a mouse by using the flat part of their pointer finger, and not the tip like many think."

At the kindergarten level, the software utilized is primarily from Sunburst, a favorite of Coutu's. "One program that we use is Type to Learn Jr.," says Coutu. "While using this software, the students have to find the letter 'A' on the keyboard. Once they find it, an alligator chomps to show that they found the correct key. Then, they have to find the letter 'B', etc. Some other software that we use from Sunburst includes Reading Maze, where students need to navigate throughout a maze by using their mouse, and Bailey's Book House. Each computer has headphones that the students wear to help them as they work with the software."

Could students in kindergarten really understand what they're learning in the computer lab? "Most of the time, the students pick it up well, and some bring that knowledge home," says Coutu. "We've had parents come in and say their kids will see them on the computer at home and tell their parents that they're not using the mouse properly or are doing things wrong and then show them the correct way."

In the upper levels, starting at 4th grade, students at Saint Michael School start to learn how to work with Microsoft Word, PowerPoint and Excel. In 4th grade, they use PowerPoint to place a picture and a word on each slide; while in 7th grade, they use PowerPoint to make a commercial. Knowing how to use Word, PowerPoint and Excel will come in handy for students throughout college and then in their working lives, as most office environments use all three programs exclusively, so the students will have a head start in their working lives.

Coutu also teaches all of her students from 2nd grade on about computer ethics, including plagiarism; why they shouldn't copy CDs and how everything you see online isn't necessarily always true. With the problems that families encountered from children illegally downloading songs through Napster and the like, these are wise lessons for students to learn.

For more information about Saint Michael School and their computer curriculum for students from kindergarten through grade 8, check out www.saintmichael.com or call 978-686-1862.