



## TOP 100 Educational Interactive Media Products FOR PRESCHOOL SETTINGS —Summer 2004—

This is a current listing of the TOP 100 (give or take a few) picks for preschool classroom settings. This list includes all forms of interactive media products, including educational software, smart toys and web sites.

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- Software changes continually, and so does this list. For an updated version, please contact us. If you notice incorrect information, please contact us at 908-284-0404 or by email ([info@childrensoftware.com](mailto:info@childrensoftware.com)).
- Older products on this list have been checked to make sure they run on current operating systems (Windows XP or Mac OSX). Even still, you may have problems installing the software.
- Prices are suggested retail, at the time of the review. Because some of these reviews are several years old, the prices can vary widely. CSR maintains a list of online stores at <http://www.childrensoftware.com/catalogs.html>. You can also learn a great deal about any title with Google, or search for the titles on [Amazon.com](http://Amazon.com) or [Libraryvideo.com](http://Libraryvideo.com).
- Internet sites for children have been improving lately, and many have been included.

### Tips for using computers & video games with children in preschool settings:

- Choose a social spot for your computer or console.
- Make sure that children know how to save their game or pause the action. This will make it much easier for them to self-regulate the time they spend with a game.
- Check your ergonomics, from a child's perspective. Make sure the monitor or TV is at a child's eye level, and the keyboard/controls are at his or her elbow level.
- Childproof your computer by creating a separate login screen for children.
- Supervise Internet access; make sure you're aware of the things your children see.
- Balance computer time with low-tech activities.
- Install software in advance, and familiarize yourself with the key features to minimize frustration.

### Arthur's Preschool

✓ **Runs on** Win 95, 98, NT; Mac OS (CD-ROM) 4.5 ★★★★★1/2  
The Learning Company, 800-543-9778, [www.learningco.com](http://www.learningco.com)  
2000, \$19.99, ages 3-5 0-7630-4909-3

✓ **Teaches** early math, early reading, shapes, letters, counting and music

The crux of this two-CD set are the eight enjoyable logic, math and reading activities all set in Arthur's treehouse. Kids use logic skills as they build bridges across puddles for ladybugs. They test their powers of observation as they help Mr. Ratburn match progressively more complex features like puppet hats and heads to put on a puppet show. Children practice their counting skills while they pitch balls to Francine at batting practice and zero in on early reading skills as they dig for letters in the sand. The activities on this CD are a mixed bag, with some stronger than others, the main weaknesses revolving around poorly defined difficulty levels (for some activities) and relatively standard themes.

The bulk of the activities are solid, however, and the second CD adds depth to the package with printable activities and an unusually child-friendly card creator. The open-ended music activity is also a strong component, allowing kids to combine the sounds of a piano, clarinet, flute, or drum set to make their own tunes.

The program's best features include the automatically adjusting difficulty levels and the printable reward certificates that are decorated with dot-to-dot puzzles. Testers adored the personalization feature in which Arthur calls them by name throughout the program. Children and parents can easily check their progress at any time, viewing which activity was played and the level accomplished.

The activities are straightforward, responsive, and kid-oriented, with terrific design features that let children determine the pace and challenge--qualities that are perfectly suited for preschoolers.

### Bailey's Book House

✓ **Runs on** Mac, DOS, Mac CD-ROM, DOS CD-ROM, Windows 4.5 ★★★★★1/2  
Edmark (Riverdeep), 800-426-0856, [www.edmark.com](http://www.edmark.com)  
1995, \$19.95, ages 2-6

✓ **Teaches** reading, letters, rhymes, prepositions, self-expression, storytelling

This solid program contains seven easy-to-use early language activities with clear speech and graphics. In Letter Machine, kids simply press a letter key to see a related animation. For instance, selecting the letter "L" triggers an animated clip of lizards loving lions. Read-a-Rhyme reads and animates silly rhymes for which kids choose the endings. In Edmo & Houdini, children experiment with prepositions like on, off and under. In Make-A-Story, kids complete sentences like "Millie rides a \_\_\_\_" by selecting a picture on the screen. Children will also find two additional activities that help them sound out and read words.

Our testers loved the Kid Cards activity which lets children easily create and print cards or posters using a limited variety of sentences and stickers. Children simply pick the project and occasion of their choice, place their stickers and text on the template, and they're ready to print.

In three of the activities, a Question & Answer mode can be activated by the child, prompting a request such as "Find the letter L."

While the activities offer a nice introduction to letter sounds and words, kids' games are not saved and the activities are the same with each play.

Adults will find a helpful section on the CD with ideas for extending the activities. Although the program could be richer in content, it offers a nice collection of activities that introduce letters and words in a light context. A network version is available for schools.

**Blue's Clues: Blue Takes You to School**

✓ **Runs on** Windows XP 4.6 ★★★★★<sup>1/2</sup>  
 Atari, 978-921-3700, www.atari.com  
 2003, \$19.99, ages 3-6

✓ **Teaches** listening, critical thinking, memory

This seventh (and best) program in the Blue's Clues series takes kids into a classroom where they can learn what preschool is all about. Children will take care of the class pet, explore the garden, play music, paint and sing along. The graphics are excellent, and the characters are true to the television show. Content includes five activities, several of which are multilevel. All are easy to play and engaging. For example, children can feed and play with a pet rabbit or steer a boat around obstacles in the water table. When they paint a picture at the art easel, they can give it to Blue or one of his friends. Characters will leave pictures for children, too, in each child's respective cubby. In the garden, children will find and take pictures of animals, and learn about them as the program creates a scrapbook. Finally, in the music room, kids listen to various rhythms to find who's playing just the right beats, and they can play along with Blue and the gang, too. There's also a Parent's Area where ideas for away-from-the-computer activities are shared. The bottom line? This is a welcome addition to any early childhood software library.

**Bob the Builder: Bob Builds a Park**

✓ **Runs on** Win 4.5 ★★★★★<sup>1/2</sup>  
 THQ, 818-871-5000, www.thq.com  
 2002, \$19.99, ages 2-5 EVERYONE

✓ **Teaches** logic, classification, music

Children help Bob the Builder fix up a park in this pleasant program. Activities are generous in number (we counted at least ten), and are easy enough for children with beginning mouse skills. Problem solving is a big focus throughout. Children help Bob by choosing and arranging the park's bandstand, pond and trees, guiding misdirected ducks, rabbits and other animals back into their pens, fixing a skateboard ramp for Spud, and reassembling dinosaur bones, among other things. Weaknesses are few and insignificant. The cursor is awkward to control in a handful of the activities, and kids inadvertently select the wrong button when positioning a golf club, or when guiding animals to pens. Strengths are abundant. The instructions are clear and readily accessible, but don't interfere with the game's responsivity. The characters offer support that is interruptible and not overdone. Children can easily see what they've completed via a child-friendly progress report, and can adjust difficulty levels for most activities. Most importantly, preschool testers thoroughly enjoyed the program.

**Boohbah Online**

✓ **Runs on** Internet Site 4.8 ★★★★★  
 Ragdoll, Ltd., , pbskids.org/boohbah  
 2004, \$free, ages

✓ **Teaches** colors, shapes, classification

Visit <http://pbskids.org/boohbah>, and you'll find a magical set of eight free virtual toys that invite exploration of size, color, shape and movement. For example, in "Boohbah Dance" children can program simple movement routines, of a character they design. Also notable is Boohbah Patterns, where children can create dynamic, moving mosaics. Each activity is easy to play, and invites creative exploration of movement and color relationships. There are both Flash and Non-Flash versions of the activities; and both are well designed. Programmed for Ragdoll by Poisson Rouge.

**Clifford Learning Activities**

✓ **Runs on** Win, Mac 4.3 ★★★★★<sup>1/2</sup>  
 Scholastic Consumer Software, 800-724-6527, www.scholastic.com  
 2001, \$19.95, ages 4-6 0-439-34399-2

✓ **Teaches** early reading, math, sorting, numbers, letters, colors, shapes

This third program in the Clifford series contains nine multilevel logic, math and reading puzzles. The activities, which vary in quality, are selected by clicking on a map of Birdwell Island. A magazine is looking for some dogs to feature in their next issue, and Clifford, T-Bone and Cleo want to make a big impression. So they go about Birdwell Island helping their neighbors, earning scrapbook pictures for each completed activity. In one, they classify and sort trash in the recycling center. In another, they fix a broken playground slide by putting a series of numbers in order. Most of the games have multiple levels and offer educational experiences that go beyond the standard colors, letters and shapes.

There are a few weaknesses to note. The sorting game throws too many variables at children in the early levels, the poster maker won't let you reverse your selections. This is too bad, as this could be a much stronger language experience. Finally, our testers had trouble moving a little dog through a maze.

On the upside, it is easy to change levels at any time, and a child's progress is kept with a special photo album. While it's not the most exciting Clifford title (we're partial to Clifford Reading), this is a very nice addition to any school or home software library. You'll want to be on hand to help, however.

**Clifford Reading**

✓ **Runs on** Win, Mac OS (CD-ROM) 4.8 ★★★★★  
 Scholastic Consumer Software, 800-724-6527, www.scholastic.com  
 2000, \$19.95, ages 4-6 0-439-21541-2

✓ **Teaches** early reading, letter sounds, spelling, sounds, fluency, vowels

Learning to read can be tricky business, but this collection of six early reading activities can help. The setting is a carnival on Birdwell Island, which also happens to be the home of Clifford the Big Red Dog and his owner Emily. By clicking on a map of the island, children can freely visit each carnival game and try to earn prize tickets which can be cashed in at a special prize machine.

The Theater Game, for example, is a timed sorting activity, with letters that rain down the screen. An even harder sorting task can be found at Grouchy Neighbors, who have an assortment of garage sale items that have been scattered by one of Clifford's giant sneezes. Winning at this game requires listening to each starting or ending sound, depending on the difficulty level. Our testers' favorite game, however, was Monique's Word Painting. This is an open-ended word creation activity where kids drag letters onto a blank canvas to form words and see them magically illustrated. The computer can recognize 600 three or four letter words, and children loved to test Monique with the silly ones. Success at any of the games earns a prize ticket, and after six are accumulated, kids are rewarded with printable Clifford activity sheets for use away from the computer. Because children sign-in, records of what they do in each activity are saved, and their progress is bookmarked.

The best part is the systematic approach to the skills presented, so that the more a child plays, the greater the challenge. There's also a book reading section designed to test a child's reading knowledge. Don't be fooled by the price... this is the most powerful, systematic reading program to come along since JumpStart Phonics, Let's Go Read or Reader Rabbit's Learn to Read System. It would be ideal for a pre-reader (ages four or five) or for an older child in need of remedial help.

**Clifford the Big Red Dog Phonics**

✓ **Runs on** Macintosh, Windows 4.3 ★★★★★<sup>1/2</sup>  
 Scholastic, Inc., 212-343-6100, www.scholastic.com  
 2003, \$19.95, ages 4-7

✓ **Teaches** reading, phonics, matching letters, word families, letter sounds

Six playful, early reading activities are found in the Word Carnival. Inflate the Balloon is a multiple-choice word matching activity, where Clifford blows up giant balloons when words like mop, top and cat are matched. In another activity, Clifford spins the Ferris Wheel as children play with word families. Other games include tightrope walking, where children match rhyming words like "whale" and "stale." The program tracks progress, and gets harder as kids play. Prizes from the activities can be used to decorate a float, which makes a nice summary activity for children. Made for Scholastic by Imagineengine.

**Clifford Thinking Adventures**

✓ **Runs on** Win, Mac OS (CD-ROM) 4.5 ★★★★★<sup>1/2</sup>  
 Scholastic Consumer Software, 800-724-6527, not available  
 2000, \$19.95, ages 4-6 0-439-21549-8

✓ **Teaches** early reading, logic, sorting, classification, counting, sequencing

This entertaining scavenger hunt style program has children exploring seven areas of Clifford's neighborhood in search of supplies needed for the Big Red Dog's birthday party. Each location contains a simple puzzle, along with several just-for-fun animations. In the park, children encounter a traffic jam and are asked to use Clifford to unscramble the cars. This is done by matching each car with its destination by steering Clifford around a neighborhood map. This takes good listening skills and plenty of experimentation. Once all the cars are in place, children are rewarded with a special jewel for Clifford's birthday collar. Because kids are asked to pick a difficulty level when signing in, each activity adjusts accordingly. Open-ended experiences keep children engaged. In one, they decorate and print out a birthday cake. Once all the items are collected, kids are rewarded with a fun arcade-style soccer game. The activities are simple but carefully leveled, so that there's enough help and variety as children progress. Also nice is Emily's smart and witty narration.

Overall, there's plenty to like about this program. The games are not fancy or innovative by any stretch, but they are tied closely to the appealing characters and story line.

**Crayola 3D Castle Creator**

✓ **Runs on** Win 95, Win 3.1 (CD-ROM) 4.4 ★★★★★ 1/2  
 IBM Corp., 800-426-7235, www.ibm.com/pc/multimedia  
 1998, \$19.95, ages 6-12

✓ **Teaches** creativity, spatial thinking, history

Kids can create their own castles using three sets of special castle blocks with pieces such as towers, stables, fences, gardens, keeps, cellars, wells and fountains. They simply click on a piece at the bottom of the screen, find a location for it, and click. The guides used for finding a spot to place your piece consist of straight vertical lines. We wondered why these guides weren't similar in shape to the items being placed, but nonetheless the pieces were very easy to manipulate.

When building their castles, kids can start from scratch, using one of four premade castles which can be altered, or add to one of seven partially built castles. Once their castles are created, they can be painted with fun patterns and paints and then printed. And, best of all, kids can walk into their castles using onscreen arrow keys or the keyboard. When they explore, they can click on the castle's inhabitants to hear historical facts and figures.

Testers enjoyed working on their castles and were successfully able to navigate through their creations. Some commented, however, that they wished they could have placed people and additional furniture in their castles. Testers also loved printing, cutting and assembling their off-computer paper castles (which became quite elaborate) and found the instructions easy to use. Teachers and parents appreciated the onscreen castle handbook with 32 pages of castle history, 17 pages on castle construction, 18 pages about exploring castles and nine diaries of castle inhabitants.

The program's weaknesses are few. The castle handbook would have been more valuable if read aloud, and the transitions between screens were somewhat slow. Overall however, the program nicely introduces an interesting part of history in a fun, creative context.

**Curious George Downtown Adventure**

✓ **Runs on** Windows, Macintosh 4.9 ★★★★★  
 Knowledge Adventure, 800-545-7677, www.knowledgeadventure.com  
 2002, \$19.99, ages 3-6 123-456789

✓ **Teaches** logic, problem solving, creativity

The Curious George books have delighted children for generations, but past attempts to bring the Man with the Yellow Hat and his little friend to the computer have missed the mark. Until now, that is, because this gem is a real winner. After signing in, children are read a short introductory story that sets the stage for the rest of the game. In classic Curious George style, the little monkey is left unattended for a few minutes, and (of course) his curiosity gets him into trouble. His predicaments play out in a series of Rube-Goldberg-like puzzles in which kids must strategically place objects to help George move from one place to another. For instance, in the downtown scene, children must drag and drop a trampoline and a ladder into just the right place in order for George to retrieve a stuck kite. Once children think they have the items in the right place, they press a Go button to see the action carried out. If something's not quite right, George won't reach his goal and kids must try again. If players are stumped, clues are one click away. There are 60 logic puzzles in all, set in places like the park, circus and candy factory. The puzzles become more challenging as children play, and more props like fans, conveyor belts and sling shots are doled out along the way. Bananas serve as rewards for puzzle success, and certificates are awarded at the five milestones mark. We especially appreciated the open-ended play area where children can build their own puzzles.

Testers young and old loved this program and wanted to keep on playing. Younger children (three and four-year-olds) relied on the help button, and in fact, the program is perhaps better suited for kids aged five and older. In sum, this is a wonderful exercise in problem solving and creative thinking that will keep children engaged for hours.

**Curious George Reading and Phonics**

✓ **Runs on** Win, Mac 4.5 ★★★★★ 1/2  
 Knowledge Adventure, 800-545-7677, www.knowledgeadventure.com  
 2002, \$19.99, ages 3-6

✓ **Teaches** letter sounds, phonics, early reading

Thoughtfully designed and very engaging, this Curious George program teaches letter recognition, phonics, and spelling to beginning readers. The Man with the Yellow Hat has a present for George but the map to its location has been torn apart and the pieces scattered all over town. Children guide George through different locations, playing five word games along the way to earn back pieces of the map. The activities are delightful and involve playing cards with George to spell words, washing windows to match upper and lower case letters and sorting rhyming words as they come down a conveyor belt. If children have difficulty, help is doled out in a sequential manner, a little bit at first, more instruction if needed. In between activities, kids help George get from place to place by guiding him through an arcade-style obstacle course, avoiding obstacles and picking up bananas along the way. When the map is assembled, George gets his present, and kids can print out a personalized newspaper telling how they helped the curious monkey with all his tasks. The program saves games and can be played at three skill levels. Weaknesses are negligible; one activity is a bit tricky in terms of game play, for instance, and kids may need some help. All in all, however, reviewers and testers alike loved the whole experience. Note: Do not confuse this title with the older, much more poorly designed "Curious George Learns Phonics."

**Disney Learning Kindergarten**

✓ **Runs on** Windows, Macintosh 4.3 ★★★★★ 1/2  
 Disney Interactive, 800-900-9234, www.disneyinteractive.com  
 2003, \$19.99, ages 4-6 EVERYONE 1-57350-759-8

✓ **Teaches** phonics, reading, math, addition, memory, problem solving, etc.

This bundle of three older Disney programs makes a nice package for five-year-olds. The best CD of the bunch is Mickey Mouse Kindergarten, a very strong multi-subject activity pack that playfully reinforces a variety of skills. Winnie the Pooh Kindergarten is also an activity pack, but isn't as good a program as Mickey Mouse. Also weak is Phonics Quest, a Disney-themed exploration of early reading skills. Still, given the merits of the Mickey CD, this is a bundle worth buying-- there's lots of content and the characters are, of course, endearing.

**Disney's Princess Fashion Boutique**

✓ **Runs on** Win 95, Win 98 (CD-ROM) 4.2 ★★★★★  
 Disney Interactive, 800-900-9234, www.disneyinteractive.com  
 2000, \$19.99, ages 5-10 EVERYONE 1-57350-315-0

✓ **Teaches** creativity, fantasy play

For children who love dolls, dress-up and fantasy play, this creativity program is a nice choice. With Cinderella, Snow White or Sleeping Beauty as their guide, girls can design a princess who looks like them, even importing a picture of their own face for the princess if they want. Next, it's off to the dressing room, where children can design ensembles, using a variety of dress parts, fabrics and colors.

Once children have designed their best princess dress, they go to a story studio. Here they choose backgrounds, stickers and music to make princess tales. Kids can write text for their stories and decorate their pictures, but these art tools can be tricky to use. It's not at all clear, for example, how to add pages to your stories. Still, the creativity options are fun.

Children will also travel through three enchanted worlds searching for treasures— additional stickers that can be used in the dressing room and story studio. Our testers loved these magical scenes, but eventually ran out of places to explore. In general, however, the CD was a hit.

**Dogz 5**

✓ **Runs on** Windows 4.8 ★★★★★  
 Ubi Soft Entertainment, 415-547-4000, www.ubisoft.com  
 2002, \$29.99, ages 4-up EVERYONE

✓ **Teaches** creativity, caring for animals, language, logic

As computer technology improves, so has this outstanding life simulation series, which is now in its fifth edition (see also Catz and Babyz). New features include weather effects, continually updated day and night, five new playscenes, and five mini-games like concentration and tic-tac-toe. Each pair of dogs can now have up to five puppies -- previous editions had just one offspring.

You start at the adoption center by selecting a pet from 15 breeds. This takes you to one of the playscenes, for instance a backyard, or a bathroom, or a winter scene. It is possible to create your own scene by importing a digital picture and creating a "floor" and "ceiling." Key to using the program is a nicely designed suitcase menu, that makes it very easy to jump from one scene to another, or pull out endless menus of pet toys, outfits to try on, boxes for them to climb in, and much more. While there is no direct educational content in this program, the open-ended nature of the activity makes it ideal for children to experiment with menus, create with sets of graphics, and play with ideas related to caring for living creatures. The bottom line? This is the best life simulation program available. Created by Studio Mythos. See a demo at <http://petz.ubi.com>.

### Dora the Explorer: Backpack Adventure

✓ **Runs on** Win, Mac

4.3 ★★★★★ 1/2

Atari, 978-921-3700, [www.atari.com](http://www.atari.com)

2002, \$19.95, ages 2-5 EARLY CHILDHOOD

✓ **Teaches** Spanish, early reading and math, classification, patterns

Based on the Nickelodeon show, this interactive cartoon adventure lets children explore Dora's world while playing five multilevel matching games. Though the activities are shallow, they do a nice job of playfully immersing children in the Spanish language -- the only program of its type to do this. For example, as children guide a balloon through a maze, they are asked to match numbers, first in English, next in a mixture of Spanish and English, and finally only in Spanish. After a child signs in, he or she can choose to play in either Freeplay or Adventure modes. In the latter, the activities are embedded in a story, but excessive narration and poorly integrated games mar the experience-- this is no *Freddi Fish*. Testers who chose to begin with this Adventure mode liked the program far less than those who began in Freeplay mode, which lets you jump directly to the activities. As children play, they earn stickers for a cleverly designed sticker book. These stickers can then be used to decorate and print scenes from the program. Progress is tracked for up to three children, and levels can be changed at anytime. A second title in the series, *Dora the Explorer: Lost City Adventure*, is in the works.

### Dora the Explorer: Lost City Adventure

✓ **Runs on** Win, Mac

4.3 ★★★★★ 1/2

Atari, 978-921-3700, [www.atari.com](http://www.atari.com)

2002, \$19.95, ages 3-5 EARLY CHILDHOOD

✓ **Teaches** English, Spanish, numbers

Dora's teddy bear is missing and children must help her find it in (and other items) in the Lost City. The program can be played in either adventure or freeplay mode, and is charming, despite the fact that Dora seems to yell her way through each scene (why doesn't she use a normal speaking voice?). When played in adventure mode, the program is quite directed and linear (needlessly so), but testers didn't seem to mind. Graphics and characters are appealing and the five activities can be played at three difficulty levels. These focus primarily on teaching numbers in English and Spanish, and the software does a good job of switching back and forth from one language to another. Although we liked the game, we are concerned with longevity-- the adventure is basically a one-time through event and somewhat brief, compared to other adventure programs. While it would be fine for home use, it would be best in a preschool classroom, for exposing children to English and Spanish.

### Fisher-Price My Very First Little People Play House

✓ **Runs on** Win 3.1, Win 95, Mac OS (CD-ROM)

4.3 ★★★★★ 1/2

Knowledge Adventure, 800-545-7677, [www.knowledgeadventure.com](http://www.knowledgeadventure.com)

1998, \$20.00, ages 2-4

✓ **Teaches** matching, counting, logic, mouse skills

Thoughtfully designed for children with developing mouse skills, this CD offers six entertaining and educational games. The software gives grown-ups two easily adjustable onscreen mouse settings. Younger children can respond to the program with a click or key press. To serve snacks to the Little People characters for example, children simply click or touch the keyboard and a cupcake or brownie will be placed on a plate.

Children with mouse skills can point and click to make their specific selection in the usual way. Young preschoolers, 2 1/2 to 4 years, loved helping the puppy cleanup by putting toys away according to instructions and also enjoyed helping him find his bone in the yard. The favorite activity was serving sandwiches, brownies and cookies to each of the Little People. Kids can also match shoes in a concentration activity, count fish in the bathtub and identify characters with familiar careers such as firefighter, veterinarian and teacher.

The program could have provided more levels, "smarts" or activities to maintain the interest of kids at the upper end of the age-group. It also should have been faster to respond to kids' actions, especially considering that it is designed to teach mouse skills. Even with its limitations, however, boys and girls aged 2 1/2 to 3 1/2 adored the program. They loved the characters and themes. One little girl even burst into tears when she had to stop playing.

### Fisher-Price Outdoor Adventures Ranger Trail

✓ **Runs on** Win 95, 98; Mac OS (CD-ROM)

4.5 ★★★★★ 1/2

The Learning Company, 800-543-9778, [www.learningco.com](http://www.learningco.com)

1999, \$19.95, ages 4-7

✓ **Teaches** science, animals, nature facts, music, logic

It's hard to imagine camping and computers in the same sentence. This playful set of six outdoor-themed games, however, is one of the few nicely designed computer activities that deals with science and the outdoors.

Children start by typing in their name and then choosing a cartoon buddy to play with. This buddy shows up in several of the activities, for instance, in an engaging log race in which kids must steer a log down a river to win. There's also a well-designed campfire sing-a-long with five enjoyable camp fire songs. As each song is played, children see the words, in a follow-the-bouncing-ball fashion. Not only is this a nice way to learn some songs, but it's a good language experience as well. Other activities include a concentration game, cave painting and a dot-to-dot game based on constellations. A sub-theme to the program is the collection of 60 different animals, found hidden as clickables in the scenes of each activity. As children search, they are told facts about each item they find. For example, we are told that bats hang upside down, and that raccoons are nocturnal animals. Children found these mini lectures to be on the dry side, especially when they couldn't be interrupted. The good news is that the quality of the graphics and music is enough to hold a child's interest.

Overall, this is a solid CD that children will enjoy. The program can keep track of multiple children, although teachers will need to monitor the printing-- there are lots of printing opportunities and this function can't be disabled.

### Flash Action Colors, Shapes & More

✓ **Runs on** Win, Mac

4.3 ★★★★★ 1/2

School Zone Interactive, 800-253-0564, [www.schoolzone.com](http://www.schoolzone.com)

2002, \$14.99, ages 3-6

✓ **Teaches** shapes, colors

Four different play areas provide straightforward but playful practice with numbers, letters, positional words (like over/under), colors, shapes, and rhyming words. The exercises are simple, workbook-like and spiced with animated routines. Four additional open-ended activities reinforce concepts. Kids can build with shapes, experiment with color while making sand pictures (testers' favorite), play with music and sounds and create animated scenes. Graphics aren't fancy but are solid. A sign-in lets kids save their last open-ended play area. Kids sometimes mixed up the exit arrow on the main screen with the back arrow on sub screens, accidentally kicking themselves out of the game. The doling out of tasks is randomized, but children encountered the same or similar questions several times. Levels are absent, decreasing the extent to which the game will grow with the child; we think it's best suited to three- and four-year-old children. Testers enjoyed the game and loved creating and printing scenes.

### Flash Action Phonics Made Easy

✓ **Runs on** Windows or Macintosh

4.6 ★★★★★ 1/2

School Zone Interactive, 800-253-0564, [www.schoolzone.com](http://www.schoolzone.com)

2003, \$14.95, ages 4-7

123-456789

✓ **Teaches** reading, phonics, word families, spelling, blends

Remember how great School Zone's Alphabet Express was? Phonics Made Easy is all that and more. From a simple, straightforward main menu, kids can launch hundreds of quick phonics exercises from four learning areas. One area teaches consonants and beginning and ending sounds. Another area focuses on vowels, while a third deals with word families. The fourth area drills blends and digraphs. Among many other things, kids add letters to make words, pick rhyming pairs and draw lines from pictures to associated sounds. The emphasis is on drill and practice, but the activities are colorful and entertaining and don't feel like work at all. As children successfully complete the exercises, they are rewarded with play in four fun creativity areas. We liked the game of making kaleidoscope patterns out of blends-- you'd be surprised at how beautiful "bl" and "gr" can be when swirled in various colors across the screen. There's also a letter-themed paint and print area, a rhyming rap game and a picture-making activity. Work can be printed, and the software tracks where children leave off. The bottom line-- If you're looking for an affordable, fun, early reading activity for either home or classroom use, this is money well spent.

**Flying Colors v. 2.11**✓ **Runs on** Win, Mac, Win XP 4.8 ★★★★★Magic Mouse Productions, 415-669-7010, [www.magicmouse.com](http://www.magicmouse.com)  
2001, \$29.00 (including delive, ages 4-up✓ **Teaches** creativity, art, drawing and painting

One of our favorite products, Flying Colors, has been re-released, which is good news for everyone. The content remains the same in this new version: compatibility issues were resolved and additional language options (Japanese, Swedish, Netherlands) were added.

For a knock-your-socks-off creativity experience, you can't beat this draw and paint program. This version has over 30 art tools, 250 colors and gradients and an absolutely amazing array of over 3100 stamps. The stamps include categories like animals, people, foods and dinosaurs and can be placed either on a blank drawing screen, or on one of over 100 backgrounds. Neat stamp sets let kids assemble dino skeletons or create their own cars, planes and boats. Our testers' favorite was a set of construction stamps that let them design and build houses and other structures piece by piece. While all these tools and options take some time to learn, the program is fairly easy to use. Narrated lessons and demo projects speed the learning process along.

The special features built in to this product make it a standout next to competition like Kid Pix Studio. The program can be set to four skill levels ranging from Preschool to Advanced. When Preschool is activated, any click of the mouse or tap on the keyboard makes something happen onscreen. Background scenes include maps of the 50 states—great for school projects—and game boards for playing checkers, chess, etc. Pictures can be easily printed or saved as bitmap (BMP) images but GIF and JPG formats are not supported.

**Harry and the Haunted House**✓ **Runs on** Win 95, Win 3.1, Mac OS (CD-ROM) 4.5 ★★★★★ 1/2Brøderbund (The Learning Company), 800-716-8506, [www.learningco.com](http://www.learningco.com)  
1994, \$19.95, ages 3-8✓ **Teaches** reading

Harry D. Ribbit hits a baseball into an old haunted house in this original story written by Mark Schlichting. Nearly every click launches an animated routine that works to support the story. There are no additional activities, however. As with all the Living Books, this one is very easy to use. Can be toggled between Spanish or English.

**I SPY Book of Letters (book cartridge)**✓ **Runs on** PowerTouch 4.6 ★★★★★ 1/2Fisher-Price, Inc., 800-432-5437, [www.fisher-price.com](http://www.fisher-price.com)  
2003, \$14.95, ages 3-5✓ **Teaches** reading: words, phonics, music, letter/sound relationships

Designed for the intermediate reader, this 26 page PowerTouch book was inspired from Jean Marzallo's riddles and Walter Wick's photographs. Each page has a rhyme, such as "I SPY four airplanes, the letter a in bat, an arrow, and ant and a hat". Rhymes are accompanied by an illustrated page with approximately 20 objects. Children can either freely explore (the default mode) or they can choose to find specific objects, count objects by category or hunt for a surprise hidden on each page.

**I Spy Junior: Puppet Playhouse**✓ **Runs on** Win, Mac OS (CD-ROM) 4.2 ★★★★★Scholastic Consumer Software, 800-724-6527, [www.scholastic.com](http://www.scholastic.com)  
2000, \$19.95, ages 3-5 0-439-21656-7✓ **Teaches** logic, following directions, listening, early reading skills

Like its sister program, I Spy Junior, this CD is based on Jean Marzallo's picture collage books and is geared toward preschoolers. Within an overall puppet show theme, there are four I Spy puzzles that tell little stories. One, for instance, tells the tale of a baby whale looking for his mother through rhymes like "I spy a hat, brown rope with a knot, two whale eyes and a crab in a pot." Children find the mentioned objects and eventually help reunite the whales. Other activities include a puppet making game where kids must listen and follow directions, a sorting game and a Make Your Own I Spy activity. All in all, this is a likable program, perhaps a bit light on content, but great for zeroing in on listening skills.

**Intellitools Classroom Suite**✓ **Runs on** Windows XP 4.5 ★★★★★ 1/2Intellitools, 707-773-2000, [www.intellitools.com](http://www.intellitools.com)  
2004, \$299.95, ages 4-up✓ **Teaches** writing, communication, special needs

IntelliTools Classroom Suite brings together three learning and productivity tools into a cross-platform, network-ready integrated suite. IntelliPics Studio 3 is a multimedia presentation tool, IntelliMathics 3 is a virtual math manipulatives tool, and IntelliTalk 3 is a talking word processor and writing tool. A consistent interface between programs makes all three easy to learn and use. PreK-8th grade teachers can assign either the provided sample activities or create their own specific standards-aligned activities with the Tools' templates. The Suite tracks each student's performance in his or her own private portfolio, records student responses, compares them to expected answers, and makes their scoring results available in both detailed and summary reports. An optional Supplementary Access Kit (Overlays and Access Guide for IntelliKeys) is also available; note that this entire product line has a huge special education following, but all of the tools are quite appropriate for general education students as well.

**Jumbo Music Block**✓ **Runs on** Smart Toy 4.8 ★★★★★Neurosmith, 800-220-3669, [www.neurosmith.com](http://www.neurosmith.com)  
2001, \$59.99, ages 1-up✓ **Teaches** early math and language, colors, shapes, numbers, music

What do you get if you combine a pillow, a busy box, and a stereo? The Jumbo Music Block, a new toy that is a case study in how technology can supplement traditional play patterns. It's an ideal item for any baby or toddler in the sensorimotor stage (one to three years of age). Each of the six, soft sides of the cube features a different door to explore, behind which children find things to interact with like a mirror, busy ball, a bean bag star, squeaky buttons, ABC and 123 flip books, and a set of spinning blocks. The cube reacts to motion, and knows which side is up, singing a shape tune, for instance, when the shape activity is on top. Under one of the doors, parents will find a volume control with two settings. Adults can also use a screwdriver to get to the batteries (four Cs) and to access the plug that accepts any of Neurosmith's existing music cartridges. We found that the cartridges greatly improve the aesthetic value and life span of the toy (try Jumpin' Jive Jazz). The default music is boppy and can wear thin. Note that a toy of this type will be mouthed by young children, but because of the electronics you won't be able to simply drop it in a washing machine. Instead, the surface will need to be cleaned with a damp cloth. We also found that if you change the cartridges a lot, you'll be tempted to leave the screw loose, which is not a good idea. All in all, this is an outstanding toy. See also Together Tunes.

**JumpStart Kindergarten (original)**✓ **Runs on** Win 95, Win 3.1, Mac OS (CD-ROM) 4.5 ★★★★★ 1/2Knowledge Adventure, 800-545-7677, [www.jumpstart.com](http://www.jumpstart.com)  
1994, \$9.95, ages 4-6✓ **Teaches** reading, letters, numbers, clocks, patterns, colors, shapes

This title was one of the best early childhood programs ever made, when it was released in 1994. It was the flagship product of the JumpStart line, and, in our opinion, one of the reasons the JumpStart series has been so successful. This original version is still available as Davidson's Learning Series Kindergarten. Here is a copy of the original review that we wrote in 1994.

After signing in on a roster posted on the door, children can click on objects in a classroom scene, 13 of which launch activities. A child who can't decide can click on a talking rabbit who suggests an activity the youngster has not yet played. The activities range in quality, content and difficulty level, and cover letters, sorting, numbers, and memory. In Puzzle, children are shown an object and must make a match using concepts such as opposites, shape, size, and color. Another fun activity is Dolls in which children see a line of seven nesting dolls standing from biggest to smallest. The order of the dolls is subsequently mixed and the children must put them back in sequence. Although challenging, testers also enjoyed Pattern Blaster, an arcade-style game in which children sort falling blocks or patterns into the correct bins according to shape or color. Records of children's work are kept and the program remembers progress from day to day.

We found a couple of design quirks. For instance, when lining up the set of dolls, the rabbit says "zero dolls are in the right place" when actually some might be in the right place. However, the number of solid activities offered makes this CD-ROM worth its purchase price. Note that more recent versions of the program are available. These cost more but have upgraded activities and design features.

## JumpStart Preschool

✓ **Runs on** Win 95, Win 3.1, Mac OS (CD-ROM) 4.6 ★★★★★<sup>1/2</sup>  
 Knowledge Adventure, 800-545-7677, www.jumpstart.com  
 1996, \$30.00, ages 2-5

✓ **Teaches** recognizing letters, numbers, shapes, colors, music, counting

This excellent collection of early learning games offers 40 educational activities. For example, children can match a numbered turtle to one of three nests (each with a set of eggs) or fill in the colors of a picture by matching shapes, letters or numbers. Kids can also place puzzle pieces in the correct spot to create an appealing scene, or play a concentration game. There are three levels of difficulty and the program keeps detailed records of children's progress in each content area. Its ease of use and enjoyable activities make this program a favorite of many of our preschool testers.

## Kid Desk

✓ **Runs on** DOS, Mac, Windows 3.1, Windows CD-ROM 4.6 ★★★★★<sup>1/2</sup>  
 Edmark (Riverdeep), 800-426-0856, www.edmark.com  
 1993, \$49.95, ages 3-10

✓ **Teaches** experiences with a calculator, clock (two types), and calendar.

This dated file management program allows children to access only the software intended for them. Upon turning on the computer, the child is presented with a personalized symbol. This icon leads to a desktop displaying his or her favorite programs. Clicking on an icon starts a program; exiting the program leads back to the desktop. The desktop has features that are fun to explore like a lamp (which darkens or lightens the desk), a clock (to see and hear the time), a nameplate (displaying the child's full name), a telephone/answering machine (to record or listen to messages) and a calendar (to print out or leave reminders). The adult options are easy to use and contain many features, including password protection, a screensaver and the ability to import recorded messages or scanned photos. Kid Desk is recommended for classroom or home settings with a range of users, especially if files need to be protected. Also see Microsoft Plus! for Kids and KidDesk Internet Safe.

## Kidspiration Version 2

✓ **Runs on** Windows, Macintosh 4.8 ★★★★★  
 Inspiration Software, Inc., 800-877-4292, www.inspiration.com  
 2004, \$69.00, ages 5-12

✓ **Teaches** organizational thinking, logic, creativity

With a new emphasis on writing, this concept-mapping tool is better than ever. Like its big brother Inspiration, Kidspiration provides a set of tools so that both teachers and students can create graphic concept maps for any subject. This edition is easier to use, with clip art to compliment the text options. It is possible to toggle back and forth from the graphic organizer view to the written outline view at any time, and there are twice as many activity templates. It is also possible to quickly sketch out a symbol, for use in diagrams or Venn diagrams. Also new is the ability to pair words with picture symbols, which is great scaffolding for young readers and writers. The bottom line? This is a wonderful creative writing tool, with endless creative possibilities.

## Krazy Art Room

✓ **Runs on** Windows 95/98/ME/NT4/2000/XP 4.4 ★★★★★<sup>1/2</sup>  
 GuruForce, Inc., 206-329-7572, www.guruforce.com  
 2002, \$39.95, ages 4-up

✓ **Teaches** creativity, art

One of those rare, "magical" programs, this easy-to-use art and creativity center captures the power of interactive media, in a way that Kid Pix has not been able to. It's like having a fully stocked art studio always at the ready. All the standard paint and draw tools are there, but it's the special effects that grab you. Once you've made an illustration, you can drag an onscreen finger through it, swirling the colors together to make something entirely new. You can "paint" with floating bubbles, growing grasses and beautiful flowers. With a few clicks, you can transform the hue, saturation and contrast of your drawing or see what it looks like in grayscale. The stamp area has animated stickers, there are hundreds of backgrounds to choose from, along with project templates including calendars and greeting cards. The sky's the limit-- our testers wanted to play with the program over and over again.

There are a few weaknesses to note. There is no sign-in, but projects can be saved in folders-- you have to figure out how to set this system up so that each child has his or her own folder. We also found adding text to projects possible, but cumbersome. Once you've typed some words on the screen, it is hard to move them, or get rid of them, and it's tricky to change the font once you've started writing. Also, the help is all text-based, so kids will need to read or have an adult on hand if they get stuck. Still, this is a powerful creativity experience that will be enjoyed by children and adults alike.

## Kurzweil 3000 Version 8

✓ **Runs on** Windows, Macintosh 4.5 ★★★★★<sup>1/2</sup>  
 Kurzweil Educational Systems, 800-894-5374, www.kurzweiledu.com  
 2003, \$395 and up, ages 6-up

✓ **Teaches** language experience, reading, phonics

Designed for students with learning disabilities or other reading difficulties, this is a well designed text-to-speech word processor and document reader lets students hear each word they type read aloud. The software can be set to read word by word, whole sentences or continuously. Text is highlighted as it is read, and there are many ways in which the font can be manipulated and enlarged to facilitate easier reading. The document reader works in much the same manner. Students scan (scanner required) or open up an existing document, and the software will read it out loud. The program is easy to use. A multi lingual dictionary and thesaurus are always available. Additional features include a notetaker with which students can make flashcards. This would be an ideal program for a learning disabled middle or high school student with a lot of reading assignments. They can just scan a chapter of their book, and the software will read it aloud to them. This way, in content area classes, students can focus on learning the subject matter and not on struggling to read the text. The main drawbacks? The price and the clunky registration process.

## LeapPad Phonics Program, Level 1

✓ **Runs on** LeapPad or Quantum Pad 4.8 ★★★★★  
 LeapFrog, 800-701-5327, www.leapfrog.com  
 2002, \$15, ages 4-7 123-456789

✓ **Teaches** reading: letter recognition, alphabet, tracing letters

Do you know a 3-or 4-year-old who is just learning to read? Keep reading! First, it is important to understand that this is the first level of a ten part series called the LeapFrog Phonics Program. Each level consists of a 34 page book and ROM cartridge designed for the LeapPad or the Quantum Pad (sold separately for about \$50).

On the first page, a child can touch any letter of the alphabet to hear it's sound, and how it is used in a word. Following pages are based on a letter (one letter per page). The final page contains a letter review. The default mode of every page in the LeapFrog books is free exploration, in other words, you just touch any picture, word or letter to hear it pronounced in a clear voice. A big part of the appeal of these activities are the playful themes (visiting a sandbox in a sunny park for the letter S, or taking a nap in a bowl of noodles for N). The illustrations are designed for exploration and supporting the content, and there is a "hidden letter" on each page. So where does the teaching come in? At any point, a child can touch one of two stars at the bottom of each page to start structured activity -- either "which letter comes next in the alphabet song" or "touch the letter S" and trace the letter to hear it's song.

Strengths include the quality music and narration, an effective use of existing play patterns such as hide-and-seek, or race the clock, plenty of repetition with each letter, the ability to interrupt any activity at any time, bullet-proof activities, good hints for incorrect answers and enough content to easily justify the price.

Weaknesses include an inability to remember what a child has done from day to day (there are no "smarts" to the assessment), which is the only reason this did not get our top rating. We took a close look at three levels of this series (Levels 1, 5 and 10) and found both the pedagogy and the content to be consistently higher in quality than competitive reading programs, including traditional pencil/paper based reading programs or cassette-based approaches like Hooked on Phonics. The primary advantage is the ability of a child to touch any picture, letter or word to hear it instantly read aloud. The bottom line? This is an ideal for a preschooler just starting to read, in just about any setting, from the back of a minivan to a classroom.

## LeapPad Plus Writing

✓ **Runs on** LeapPad  
 LeapFrog, 800-701-5327, www.leapfrog.com  
 2003, \$59.95, ages 4-8

✓ **Teaches** writing, letter formation, reading, logic, math

Update 2004: This LeapPad now has a handwriting recognition feature, which can distinguish when a child makes a letter or number correctly (the version released last year could not do this). Activities and games are no longer preset: children can create their own game and play by writing down letters and numbers, and the system will play games around it.

This new LeapPad functions exactly like previous LeapPad models, with the additional feature that lets children write on each page, using a special pencil stylus. This is useful for dot-to-dot puzzles, letter and numeral tracing, and Zaner-Bloser hand writing practice.

As the soft-lead pencil glides across the paper, it creates a string of inputs (it sounds like a cat purring) which enables the device to understand lines. It is easy to confuse the reader -- for example, it keeps telling you to "start at the blue dot" when you already made the line. Our testers liked the mazes and letter tracing the best, and found the picture drawing opportunities to be rather pointless. A large eraser makes it easy to clean the page for future use, and the paper is durable enough to put up with repeated use. Note that it is easy to switch between pencil mode and stylus mode, and that the reader can also read any previous LeapPad books. Additional writing activity books are \$14.99 each. Runs on 4 AA batteries.

**LeapPad "Record and Play" Microphone**

✓ **Runs on** LeapPad 4.8 ★★★★★  
 LeapFrog, 800-701-5327, www.leapfrog.com  
 2003, \$25, ages 3-up  
 ✓ **Teaches** reading

Plug this microphone into the cartridge port of your LeapPad, and you can put your own voice into two specially designed books. One teaches phonics by encouraging children to pronounce phonemes, words and sentences on each page. The idea is very solid -- having children making the sounds, rather than listening to them as with many traditional phonics activities. The second book prompts children to record their own name as well as sounds that an animal might make, and then puts them into the story (sort of like "madlibs" with sound).

**Leapster: Dora the Explorer**

✓ **Runs on** Leapster 4.3 ★★★★★1/2  
 Leapfrog, 800-701-5327, www.leapfrog.com  
 2004, \$25, ages 4-6

✓ **Teaches** early reading and math: memory, language (Spanish/English), shapes  
 This Leapster cartridge offers two modes of play and five activities that informally reinforce basic math, early reading and memory skills. After signing in (the game can store up to three players) children choose from "story" and "activity" mode. The story mode embeds the activities in a story about animals in danger. As they work through each game, children rescue animals, who show up later in the Animal Rescue Center.

The other way to play is to go directly to the games, and select one of three challenge levels. Animal Match is a sound matching game, where children hear an animal sound, and then select one of three options with the arrow keys. Stepping Stones is one of the weaker games, where Dora hops from rock to rock, in search of a specific shape or letter. Troll Bridge is one of the stronger activities, featuring four types of concentration. The action is fast paced, and you can choose to match sounds, opposites, letters or numbers. Animal Rescue is a slow moving activity, where children complete a bridge by pushing number or pattern blocks in place. Celebration is an innovative movement game, where children are asked to match the movements of Dora on the screen. All in all, this is a solid set of activities that nicely span the K to 1st grade age range. It is not as much fun as Spongebob, but still a solid game.

**Leapster Kindergarten**

✓ **Runs on** Leapster 4.7 ★★★★★1/2  
 LeapFrog, 800-701-5327, www.leapfrog.com  
 2004, \$25, ages 4-6

✓ **Teaches** math (early addition, money), reading (spelling words like "hat"), color,  
 This well designed Leapster cartridge contains five math, reading and memory games; and one clever dancing game as a reward. Leap, Lilly and little brother Tad visit a carnival where they can play the games by touching one of six icons from the main menu.

Games include Fun House (a timed maze game that requires matching letters to spell short words), Candy Combos (Paint candy to spell words), Balloon Caboom (notice patterns by "popping the balloon that doesn't belong with the others", in order to get to the popperma, an addicting speed game. Splat That asks you go "splat" (shoot) pictures that start or end with a particular sound -- control is a bit clumsy, but not bad. Earned tickets can be redeemed to purchase monster parts, which can be used to build a monster at the Monster Theater (a very clever dancing activity). As with Leapster 1st Grade, this cartridge saves the tokens and times for three children, and many of the activities have three levels. All in all, this is an excellent set of activities for preschool, kindergarten and first graders.

**Leapster Multimedia Learning System**

✓ **Runs on** Leapster 4.8 ★★★★★  
 LeapFrog, 800-701-5327, www.leapfrog.com  
 2003, \$80, ages 4-10

✓ **Teaches** reading, math, logic, music, memory

This portable cartridge-based handheld computing platform can run educational games, electronic books, digital art and interactive videos. One software cartridge, Learning With Leap (4.3 stars), is included -- the Leapster won't work unless at least one cartridge is included. Test families using "Learning With Leap" reported that they would buy the platform, citing the desire for an educational option to the Game Boy. They also like the fact that additional titles will be available, giving this toy a potentially long life. Built in controls include PAUSE (freeze the action at any time), HINT, and HOME (brings up the first screen, from any point). The graphics are fuzzy compared to a typical PDA, because they are programmed in a derivative of Macromedia Flash (this allows the software to be highly compressed). Also, the game play pales in comparison to the speedy Game Boy, but the 66 MHz microprocessor does a good job delivering educational games responsively. The sound quality is excellent, either through the speakers or through the headphone jack. Runs on 4 AA batteries. Additional cartridges are better designed than the included "Learning With Leap" and cost \$25 each for the educational activities, or \$20 for the movies, each reviewed separately. Note that a rechargeable battery option will be sold separately for \$25.

**Leapster Software: Letter Factory Video**

✓ **Runs on** Leapster 4.8 ★★★★★  
 LeapFrog, 800-701-5327, www.leapfrog.com  
 2004, \$20, ages 3-6

✓ **Teaches** letters, letter sounds, the alphabet

This cartridge contains the same 35 minute animated cartoon found on DVD or VHS, with the addition of "chapter games" that offer simple reviews of letter sounds and letter names. In the story, the frog family gets a special tour through a letter factory. Each letter is introduced and sounded out in new and refreshing ways, and there is plenty of repetition combined with themes that are compelling for the age range. For example, the letter F sprouts wings, and flies around the room (each flap = the F sound). The graphics are not as good as the video version, as you might expect, but are certainly passable. The audio is excellent; it is possible to hear the difference between similar sounding letters (like N and M). The bottom line? This is an excellent early reading activity.

**Learn Through Music**

✓ **Runs on** Smart Toy 4.6 ★★★★★1/2  
 Fisher-Price, Inc., 800-432-5437, www.fisher-price.com  
 2003, \$34.99, ages 1.5 to 4

✓ **Teaches** music, signing, colors, animals, memory, letters

High tech mixes with low tech, in this fun, responsive, noisy music player that is ideal for toddlers and preschoolers. The software comes in the form of plastic scrolls that snap into place, each delivering 15 panel-long story. The slightest touch on the 4 x 5 inch screen causes the picture to come alive, with lights that shine through the printed picture. This is used to highlight whatever a child touches, and it works like a charm. Because it is so noisy and responsive, it invites exploration. There are three modes for each page activated by buttons-- explore (touch any item to hear it labeled), quiz ("find the apple) and sing along (using the attached microphone). The toy comes with one scroll: Elmo's ABC Scavenger Hunt. Two additional cartridges are also available -- Blue's Colorful Friends and Dora's Farm Adventure. Both are nicely designed, and cost \$10 each.

Parents note -- there is no volume control. This is a LOUD toy that could drive you INSANE if you're not careful. But kids love it, and that's what is important, right? The toy is powered by 3 "C" batteries.

**Learn to Read for Children at Starfall**

✓ **Runs on** Internet Site 4.5 ★★★★★1/2  
 www.starfall.com, , not available  
 2003, \$free, ages 6-12

✓ **Teaches** reading, phonics, vocabulary

You can't argue with the price of this set of web site-based activities. It's basically a large set of well designed and leveled interactive reading books for grades K - 1. There are two sections to the site. Learn to Read, for beginning readers, contains 15 short stories designed around letter sounds. For example, "Gus the Duck" is offered up for the letter U. In the stories, each part of the word is sounded out. There is also an electronic word sheet activity for each book. It's Fun to Read (geared to the first grade reader) consists of four tongue twisters, an all about me activity (a survey style game where you choose hair color, etc.), bird riddles, and so on. The art and narration is excellent, and the interface is well designed. A newer browser is required. All the activities are designed in Flash, and load nicely using a standard 512K DSL connection. The catch? It's hard to find one. The site is owned and maintained by the Blue Mountain Company, which sells greeting cards and print versions of the books (not required in order to use the site). There's no visible advertising.

**LiteracyCenter.Net**

✓ **Runs on** Internet Site 4.5 ★★★★★1/2  
 FamiliarTales, Inc., 415-348-8711, www.literacycenter.net  
 2003, \$free, ages 3-up

✓ **Teaches** letter recognition, tracing letters, letter sounds, phonics, the alphabet

Clean, flash card-like activities introduce each upper and lowercase letter. There is no cost, and the screens are free of ads. Make sure you have a current version version of Flash on your browser in order for the activities to work. http://www.literacycenter.net

**Little Bill Thinks Big**

✓ **Runs on** Macintosh, Windows 4.4 ★★★★★1/2  
 Scholastic, Inc., 212-343-6100, www.scholastic.com  
 2003, \$19.95, ages 4-6 EVERYONE 0-439-56537-5  
 ✓ **Teaches** math, logic

Kids visit Little Bill's home to play ten activities and earn the items needed for a big surprise. They'll use their math and logic skills to launch a submarine, bake cookies, travel to outer space and more. One activity, for instance, has kids using logic to correctly place the tubes for Little Bill's hamster maze. Another activity has them matching shapes to make cookies. Content includes 20 mini-games, and the program features auto-leveling that adjusts to children's progress. Skills addressed include numbers, counting, sorting, sequencing, patterns, shapes, creativity and following directions. Some of the activities are lacking in depth and originality, but all in all this is a lovely, gentle program, much like the Nick Jr. TV show. It is also rare to find quality software that features an African American child, making this a welcome addition to your software library.

**Math Missions K-2: The Race to Spectacle City Arcade**

✓ **Runs on** Macintosh, Windows 4.5 ★★★★★1/2  
 Scholastic, Inc., 212-343-6100, www.scholastic.com  
 2003, \$19.95, ages 5-8 EVERYONE

✓ **Teaches** math; counting, place value, sorting, classifying, sets, measurement

The first of a two part series, this playful, solid math program is ideal for providing practice with the core math skills a child will use in any K-3 curriculum. After they sign in, children explore the subway, ferry, bus and five shops of Spectacle City, where they can solve math problems like "count out three coins that equal 12¢" or "help sort out the animals." The more they play, the more money they can earn to use toward maintaining and upgrading the town arcade. The best parts of the program are the quality and quantity of activities, and the way they let children use the kind of math problems found in any school. Educator Marilyn Burns served as a consultant on the curriculum component and it shows.

Creature Comforts is a pet store where you sort animals according to their key visual attribute (stripes and legs, etc.). At the World Piece Building, children drag and drop tangram puzzle pieces to help complete a skyscraper. Jump for Toys is a toy shop, where children must use place value to count out money needed to complete toy orders. Incredible Bulk and other activities use shopping to let children round to the nearest ten, match number words, add and subtract whole numbers, or measure items. Throughout the program, random events occur to keep things interesting, for example, a newspaper boy will pass by, with headlines featuring your progress.

The program keeps detailed records of every problem tried by each child, and it is easy to switch levels, or jump to the sign-in screen to start a new player (essential for classroom use). The only drawback -- some of the menu icons are confusing, and there is no control over the sound. Note that a school version is sold by Tom Snyder (\$40), and that there is a similarly designed version of this program with more advanced math content called Math Missions 3-5: The Amazing Arcade Adventure. The program was created by Hypnotix for Scholastic.

**Max's Sandbox 1.5.0**

✓ **Runs on** Windows 98, ME, XP with Office 97 or newer 4.5 ★★★★★1/2  
 eWord, Inc., 908-439-2439, www.maxssandbox.com  
 2002, \$48, ages 5-11

✓ **Teaches** writing, graphing, creating, spelling, text-to-speech, math, word

Note: This product was renamed "Scholastic Keys" in January of 2004, and is distributed by Tom Snyder Products (a Scholastic company). Some of the menus were redesigned. The following review appeared in the November 2002 issue of CSR.

Finally... a suitable talking word processing option for young children. Designed for Windows computers with Microsoft Office (97 or better), this program takes three Office applications (Word, PowerPoint and Excel) and makes them child-friendly. Once installed, three shortcut icons appear on your computer desktop-- MaxWrite (Word), MaxShow (PowerPoint) and MaxCount (Excel). Your child clicks on an icon, and the Office application starts, followed by the Max's Sandbox screen. You can easily toggle between the regular version and the child version. The child-friendly menus make it easy to add pictures, change text colors (something kids love to do), save or retrieve files, and so on. MaxCount includes five structured graphing activities and nicely supports K-3 math curriculum in general. MaxShow has templates for creating narrated presentations like "what I did this weekend." The most useful is MaxWrite, the word processor, that makes it easy to combine text with pictures and sketches. All the applications have quick access to a sketching utility that is on par with KidPix, and the clipart library has 576 graphics. But the most impressive feature is the one-click access to text-to-speech. Other nice functions include one-click saving, and file menus that use large thumbnails, so non-readers can easily find and open up previous work.

Drawbacks are few, but include a rather complex registration process, and a set of clunky looking, highly pixilated menu icons. Our testers were disappointed by some omissions in the clipart .. no girl soccer player, for example. But the images are easily selected and placed, and the words wrap right around in the Word document.

This could be the ideal tool for KidPix-weary preschool and early elementary classrooms. The program was designed last year in Australia, and is now being localized in the US in the school market.

**Mighty Math Carnival Countdown!**

✓ **Runs on** Win 95, Win 3.1, Mac OS (CD-ROM) 4.8 ★★★★★  
 Edmark (Riverdeep), 800-426-0856, www.edmark.com  
 1996, \$29.00, ages 3-6

✓ **Teaches** math: counting, comparing, sorting, patterns, place value

Imagine a magical parking lot where children drive around bumper cars that contain animals. They can either freely drive, or try to crack puzzles that require parking certain types of animals in just the right area of the parking lot. (Don't tell the kids they're learning how Venn diagrams work.) Or, how about a set of "smart" bubbles that show how place value works when ten ones bubbles merge into one large tens bubble? These are just a few of the clever techniques used to introduce important early math concepts.

Getting started is easy. Kids just sign in or select their names from a roster, and then click one of five carnival scenes to launch an activity. Besides the Carnival Cars and Bubble Band, there's the Giggle Factory where children can explore less than, greater than and equal to by weighing laugh and giggle balls on a balancing scale. In Snap Clowns, children build colorful patterns with strings of clowns, or divide them up into sets. For geometric concepts, Pattern Block Roundup lets children paint, glue, hammer and measure shapes. Special tools let them break larger shapes into smaller parts, or instantly calculate the area or perimeter of a design.

Like other Edmark products, each activity can be toggled between "explore" and "question and answer" modes.

The only fault to this program is that there is no overall context to the games. It might be nice to see the puzzles woven into a general theme or story, so children get a sense of what the activities mean. But the bottom line is that the program delivers a concentrated dose of math content in a very friendly way, and it is easy enough for even the most math-phobic child.

**Millie & Bailey Preschool**

✓ **Runs on** Win 95, Win 3.1, Mac OS (CD-ROM) 4.5 ★★★★★1/2  
 Edmark (Riverdeep), 800-426-0856, www.edmark.com  
 1997, \$29.95, ages 2-4

✓ **Teaches** reading, math, logic, matching, classifying objects

Children are sure to like this collection of eight math, reading and science games, taken from Millie's Math House and Bailey's Book House. These classic programs introduce early reading, math and logic skills in clever activities. Kids use a blueprint to build a mouse house, or they select the right size shoes for little, middle and big characters. The activities are fun and have multiple levels. Preschoolers ask to play the program over and over again.

**Millie's Math House**

✓ **Runs on** Mac, DOS, Windows (disk or CD-ROM) 4.8 ★★★★★  
 Edmark (Riverdeep), 800-426-0856, www.edmark.com  
 1995, \$19.95, ages 2-6

✓ **Teaches** math, counting, sets, sequencing by size, shapes

Well loved throughout the years, this enjoyable program allows children to practice their early math skills by building a mouse house, counting jelly beans and putting shoes on little creatures-- all very simple, but engaging, activities. Testers' favorite game lets them build monsters by adding just the right number of body parts. The graphics are still good, even though the program was originally created in 1992. In addition to the original activities, this version offers a concrete presentation of addition and subtraction concepts. A Spanish version is also available.

**Morton Subotnick's Hearing Music**

✓ **Runs on** Windows, Macintosh 4.3 ★★★★★1/2  
 Viva Media, 877-848-6520, www.viva-media.com  
 2004, \$29.99, ages 8-up EVERYONE 1-932174-35-4

✓ **Teaches** music, ear training, pitch, rhythm

This simple, well designed program makes a perfect first ear-training experience. Four activities ask children to listen and differentiate between musical notes, patterns, pitches and rhythms. As kids progress through each leveled activity, they'll learn to recognize the difference between a major and minor chord, changes in tempo, and what the same piece of music sounds like played backwards. One activity, for instance, has children finding bits of matching melodies. Another asks kids to decide whether two musical interludes are identical or played at differing tempos or pitches. The software is smart, automatically getting easier or harder based on the child's responses. When a child completes a level, she is treated to a rousing, animated rendition of Handel's Messiah. Music used in the program includes works from Mozart, Schumann and Beethoven.

If all this sounds like serious work rather than play, it's not. The graphics and animations are fun and appealing to children, and the activities are presented much like puzzles to solve. It's a compelling, entertaining experience. Parent and teacher options allow for records to be kept for multiple children. Although the packaging says the program is best suited for ages eight and older, we can see five, six and seven year olds really enjoying the listening challenges.

## Music Blocks

✓ **Runs on** Smart Toy 4.7 ★★★★★<sup>1/2</sup>  
 Neurosmith, 800-220-3669, www.neurosmith.com  
 1999, \$69.95, ages 2-7  
 ✓ **Teaches** music, creativity

Please see Music Blocks Maestro (the updated version of this toy, released in 2003). The following review appeared in the May 1999 issue of CSR.

Does playing with blocks lead to an appreciation and awareness of music? Yes, at least in the case of this smart toy. Music Blocks consists of a lap-sized console, five colorful blocks with different symbols on each side and a Mozart cartridge. Additional cartridges are available, containing rhythms, Bach, Opera, Surfer music, and Jazz. The symbols represent different instruments like woodwinds, trumpets and voices, and the various block colors represent two-measure phrases of melody. As your child places the blocks in varying orders on the console, she creates different combinations of music, and new melodies are created. The product is a stand-alone, battery-operated toy, with no hook-up to the computer required.

Our test families went crazy over this innovative device, with both children and parents asking for a turn. The younger kids were content to simply play with the blocks and console, experimenting with the sounds and music. Older children, ages eight to eleven, got into the composing, and wrote down block patterns that made the nicest "songs". Our only complaint? The high price tag, especially as your kids will soon be asking for other cartridges, which are priced around \$20 each. Price aside, though, this toy is exceptional, offering endless opportunities for creative play and learning.

## My First Amazing World Explorer/History Explorer Bundle

✓ **Runs on** Win 95, 98; Mac OS (CD-ROM) 4.7 ★★★★★<sup>1/2</sup>  
 DK Multimedia, 888-342 5357, www.dk.com  
 1998, \$call, ages 5-10

✓ **Teaches** world history, world geography, logic, maps

This two CD bundle lets kids explore geography and history in a playful and engaging way. In My First Amazing World Explorer, children visit faraway places, send postcards and collect stamps in their passports. The activities begin with the creation of a passport, which allows children to sign in and then track their progress. What's great about this program are the many different layers of play and the features that keep kids coming back over time. By exploring animated maps of the world, children can visit familiar as well as exotic places. Boats and planes take them on journeys and allow them to collect 19 stamps in their passports. Clicking on pictures of people, buildings, animals and other attractions bring up information windows about the subjects. Many of these windows permit kids to take a snapshot to add to their "sticker book."

With My First Amazing History Explorer, children travel back in time to visit eight countries. Their mission is to rescue a missing professor who is lost somewhere in history. To accomplish this task, kids must locate key historical artifacts. They travel back to Ancient Egypt, The Industrial Age and the Roman Empire. As children explore, they earn stickers, play activities and learn lots of history via 150 narrated popup screens. Other features include two hours of narration, a comprehensive multiple choice quiz, and a glossary of terms. This is a super program that keeps kids engaged and learning for hours.

## My First LeapPad

✓ **Runs on** Smart Toy 4.8 ★★★★★  
 LeapFrog, 800-701-5327, www.leapfrog.com  
 2001, \$30.00, ages 3-5

✓ **Teaches** phonics, early math, early reading, colors, music shapes

Update for 2004. There are now a total library of 15 books/cartridges for My First LeapPad, and the price had dropped \$5. New books include Dr. Suess-Wocket in My Pocket, Dr. Suess--Foot Book, Disney Princess Tales and the Wiggles.

Smaller than the regular LeapPad (the books are 5 x 7 inches in size) this responsive electronic book reader is designed to be a first introduction to the world of print. After the four AA batteries are installed, you place the specially designed spiral bound book called "Leap's Big Day" in place and turn on the toy with the large "on/off" button. The story is a bland "run Spot run" style book about a Frog who lost his kite. As each page is turned, it must first be activated by touching the "GO" spot. Next, children can touch any word or picture to hear it labeled in clear speech. Each page has a "GAME" button that prompts children with structured questions ("can you find the red square?"). At review time, two additional books were available that we did not review -- Pooh's Honey Tree and Leap to the Moon. Each comes with a book and RAM cartridge.

Strengths include a generous amount of content (we counted 14 activities), a durable design that can withstand daily preschool use, clear speech and portability. Additional features to note include a headphone jack. Weaknesses include the bland story of the first book, and one tester noted that the background music for each page can get a bit annoying. (volume can be adjusted). The bottom line? For \$35, this toy gives you an outstanding early language experience.

## Olo and the Sunny Valley Fair

✓ **Runs on** Windows, Mac (OS X only) 4.9 ★★★★★  
 Hulabee Entertainment, 425-739-2700, www.Hulabee.com  
 2002, \$19.99, ages 3-6 123-456789

✓ **Teaches** creativity, memory, logic, counting, patterns, sorting, sequencing,  
 Children control the movements of "Olo" (a rolling blue ball with eyes) as they go on a scavenger hunt in search of special items needed to save Sunny Valley from a giant rolling tomato. The genius of the Olo character is in its simplicity. This little, gender-neutral, blue ball has expressive eyes but never talks-- letting a child's imagination do the work. It works like a charm: Olo becomes what you want it to be.

Those familiar with the Freddi Fish or Putt-Putt series of adventures will appreciate that this program shares the same principal creators. However, some unique strengths take this software a step further: (1) state of the art graphics, narration and music; (2) a strong story line, with well developed characters that leave much to the imagination; (3) plenty of developmentally appropriate activities that are perfectly leveled for children (4) a new chapter metaphor that breaks the adventure into manageable parts; and (5) good management features. All this, and closed captioning, too.

There are three larger activities (create patterns in the garden, decorate cakes and drop marbles) and dozens of mini games found behind the clickables, asking children to count by 3s, classify the flowers, compare quantities and so on. We were delighted by the educational validity of the activities, especially the open-ended style in which children encounter the concepts. Our testers were thrilled with the program, and so were we.

## Oscar the Balloonist and the Secrets of the Forest

✓ **Runs on** Win 95, 98, NT; Mac OS (CD-ROM) 4.3 ★★★★★<sup>1/2</sup>  
 Viva Media (formerly Tivola), 877-848-6520, www.viva-media.com  
 1999, \$19.99, ages 4-8 3-931372-25-1

✓ **Teaches** science, environment, memory, logic

A lovely program, this CD lets young children explore the woods, meet animals and learn about their habits. Kids join Oscar, a little boy, who is given the task of visiting the forest animals in each of the four seasons. Among the animals children meet are badgers, bats, mice and ants. They'll visit the animals' homes and see what they eat, while playing fun and educational activities. One has kids feeding each animal his favorite food, while another has them matching leaves to trees. The software is unusually child-friendly, and kids can easily switch back and forth between English and German. There is no printing and no text, but games can be saved. Fans of Richard Scarry and The Jolly Postman will like this program as the illustrations are quite similar.

## Pencil-Pal Kindergarten

✓ **Runs on** Win, Mac 4.4 ★★★★★<sup>1/2</sup>  
 School Zone Interactive, 800-253-0564, www.schoolzone.com  
 2002, \$19.95, ages 4-6 1-58947-521-6

✓ **Teaches** math, reading, shapes, colors, numbers, counting, alphabet, patterns,  
 School Zone's Pencil-Pal software series makes its debut with this delightful Kindergarten program. After signing in, children are taken to a colorful clubhouse. Behind five doors are a cast of friendly animal characters that introduce the activities. There's a fun art area (our testers' favorite) where children can color alphabet pictures or draw their own. This section is a real kid-pleaser with its fun colors, cool patterns and easy to use tools. Another door leads to a theater where children can watch 12 full screen movies. These vary in subject and format. There's a narrated slide show about children on a farm and an animated video about shapes. The third and fourth doors house dot-to-dots and jokes, respectively, and behind the fifth, children will find a multi-subject learning game that reinforces letters, numbers, counting, pattern recognition, rhyming and more. Content in this game automatically adjusts to the child's skill level.

Like School Zone's On-Track series, the Pencil-Pal software comes with a workbook, in this case, one with 63 pages of brightly colored, appealing activities. Both CD and workbook are very well done. Our main concern was the loud background music on the CD. The next titles in the series are Preschool, First Grade and Phonics.

## Phonics Tiles

- ✓ **Runs on** Smart Toy, Requires 4 AA batteries. 4.3 ★★★★★ 1/2  
 Neurosmith, 800-220-3669, www.neurosmith.com  
 2002, \$79.99, ages 3-5 123-456789  
 ✓ **Teaches** letter sounds

This remarkable early reading innovation lets children freely experiment with letters by placing letter tiles into one of five magnetic holders. Children like the tactile feel they get as the magnets grab the tile, and if they push on any tile once it is in the holder, the letter is instantly sounded out in clear speech. What's more remarkable is the "play" button, that sounds out all the letters, and reads the word if the letters happen to make one. A word is found on the back of each tile (lion on the back of L for example) for expanded play. The entire device is a 3 foot long vinyl mat that is designed to work hanging from a wall or laying on the floor, and there is a clear pocket for each letter tile. Additional modes of play, which children can easily select, include a sing-along game and a structured mode where kids are prompted to "Press the letter that makes the sound 'Puh'". Criticisms are minor. Getting the letters out of the pockets can be clumsy, and there are no headphone jacks. Also, since there is only one of each letter, words like "tree" are not possible. Still, for a focused, high quality product that zooms in on phonics, you can't go wrong with this toy. Note that an expansion cartridge is available called World Challenge, with 26 additional tiles that introduce 500 additional words. The product is powered by 4 AA batteries. See also MagnaPhonics.

## Piglet's Big Game

- ✓ **Runs on** Macintosh or Windows 95/98/ME/XP 4.2 ★★★★★  
 Disney Interactive, 800-900-9234, www.disneyinteractive.com  
 2003, \$19.99, ages 4-up EVERYONE 1-57350-739-3  
 ✓ **Teaches** logic, memory, early reading

It's a Very Large Soup Party in the Hundred-Acre Wood, and children must help Piglet gather the ingredients. As Piglet, kids explore screen after screen of beautiful Winnie-the-Pooh cartoon style graphics, with movie-quality narration. They'll meet up with other characters, help them solve problems, and collect milk, honey and "haycorns" to make the soup. This is a classic "explore and find", scavenger hunt program that was designed by Hulabee Entertainment for Disney -- the same team that made Freddi Fish, Putt Putt and Ollo. The main strength of the program is that it is wonderfully simple to play, with lots of story-related clickable and entertaining activities. For example, to get to a nearby island, children have to carefully time Piglet's jumps. To get Pooh's honey pot, they must first sequence five spice jars. Children can save games, and even turn on subtitles, making this a strong language experience activity for early readers or hearing impaired children. There's also a scrapbook to help kids remember what they need to collect. So why doesn't the CD get a higher rating? There isn't enough content. Once you've played the program through to the end (which one savvy five year old tester did in about 2 hours), you're done. Still, this is a very nice starter program for younger preschoolers. Note that there is also a Game Boy Advance version (with the same title) which is not nearly as good as this Mac/Windows version.

## Pixter Color

- ✓ **Runs on** Pixter 4.6 ★★★★★ 1/2  
 Fisher-Price, Inc., 800-432-5437, www.fisher-price.com  
 2003, \$80, ages 4-up  
 ✓ **Teaches** creativity, early learning, math, counting, dot-to-dot puzzles

Two years after the first Pixter, this new version features a color back-lit touch screen, with significantly better resolution than the previous Pixters. Onboard software includes four activities, selectable from the main menu. Free Draw has a pencil, stamps, shapes and an eraser. Scene Starters is like a coloring book, where you scroll through a variety of backgrounds, and then color in the scene. Color by Number lets you fill in pictures by matching numbers using a paint bucket. Connect the Magic Dots lets you complete dot-to-dot puzzles by following a series of flashing dots. In addition, there are four color cartridges (sold separately for \$15 each) -- Arcade, Dinosaurs, Rescue Heroes and Barbie. There will be two more by mid-October (Sponge Bob and Smart-Start Studio). Like the older Pixter, this one requires 4 AA batteries that gives it approximately 4 hours of operating time. New (welcome) features include a volume dial and a headphone jack. Note that this new Pixter will be able to run older Pixter cartridges, but the new cartridges will not run on older Pixters (similar to the Game Boy/Game Boy Advance relationship). The old cartridges appear in black and white. Also see iSprout and Leapster. Coming September 2003. Tip: calibrate the stylus by turning the Pixter over and finding the calibration hole. Then follow the onscreen instructions.

## Pixter Creativity System

- ✓ **Runs on** Smart Toy 4.5 ★★★★★ 1/2  
 Fisher-Price, Inc., 800-432-5437, www.fisher-price.com  
 2001, \$40.00, ages 4-up  
 ✓ **Teaches** creativity

Please see Pixter PLUS, which was released in August of 2002. The following review was from the September 2001 issue of CSR.

Great for sketching ideas, this handheld creativity toy features 3 by 3 1/2 inch touch sensitive, black and white screen and a stylus. Kids use the gadget to scribble, draw, or complete dot-to-dot puzzles. The graphics are crude, with highly pixelated jagged lines, the menus could be easier to use, and adjusting the volume is not obvious. These things limit the creative potential of this toy. However, many of these same criticisms could be made about the beloved etch-a-sketch, a toy that has stood the test of time. Strengths of the gadget include good responsiveness, easy undo, and no need for paper! Note that there are five cartridges (\$12 each) that expand the functionality of the toy and vary in quality: Learning Fun (a letter/number coloring book), Art Safari (mix and match animal parts), On the Go Games (BINGO, Tic-Tac-Toe, mazes and concentration), Story Composer (choose a theme, and then create pages, along with text) and Action Art (create simple motion pictures by combining different sequences). The toy requires 4 AA batteries. Our conclusion? This is a break through creativity toy and it works with younger children (they'll even fight about it). It's obvious, however, that this is the kind of toy that will be greatly improved over the next year, as the technology improves.

## Playskool Puzzles

- ✓ **Runs on** Win 95, Win 3.1, Mac OS (CD-ROM) 4.8 ★★★★★  
 Hasbro Interactive/Infogrames, 978-921-3001, www.hasbro-interactive.com  
 1996, \$19.99, ages 3-6  
 ✓ **Teaches** logical thinking, creativity, language, letters, numerals

Here's a collection of puzzles in which the pieces never get lost! There are five activities mixed in with plenty of fun sounds and animation and some basic creativity tools that allow children to personalize the puzzles they make. Connect the Dots extends the age-old dot-to-dot puzzle by letting children "sew" together a string of upper or lower case letters with a needle-shaped cursor. In another clever activity they use a wrench to tighten bolts while following a number pattern. Mix and Match lets kids combine 62 different human and animal body parts. They can put a baby's head on an alligator or roller skates on a professor. There's also a jigsaw puzzle game in which children select from jagged, smooth, or rounded pieces and (the best part) personalize the picture using a set of stickers and art tools. We found that children were more interested in assembling pictures they had a part in creating than using those from the library.

Nice features include the ability to print or save work and a smart help system that cleverly assists children in the placement of the puzzle pieces. An optional pull-down menu makes it fast and easy to change activities or difficulty levels on the fly. These features, combined with the playful music and variety of things to do make this a good purchase. One test family raved, "My daughter played with it for hours and didn't get bored ... this is one of the sharpest preschool titles I've seen." We agree.

## PowerTouch Learning System

- ✓ **Runs on** PowerTouch 4.5 ★★★★★ 1/2  
 Fisher-Price, Inc., 800-432-5437, www.fisher-price.com  
 2003, \$49.99, ages 3-8  
 ✓ **Teaches** pre-reading, math, reading readiness, phonics

"PowerTouch" is a great name for this notebook sized book reader because of the way it lets even very young children interact with print and pictures -- with a finger instead of a stylus. Like the touchpad found on most notebook computer touchpads, the PowerTouch knows where a child has touched on the page, and provides response feedback. The reader can also automatically sense what page it is on, making more "user friendly" than the well known LeapPad, which asks a child to touch a green button on each page to start playing. The PowerTouch's automated process that takes feedback from a series of special holes in the top margin of each book. These, along with a reflective spot printed on each page, tells the device what page is in play. So even a very young child can flip the book open to any page, and start touching. All things considered, all aspects of the PowerTouch make it easy to have a successful experience.

There is another important difference to note, as both the LeapPad and the PowerTouch target early reading. A child's finger is less precise than the LeapPad Stylus, plus children learn to hold pencils and crayons at a very young age. So the LeapPad is able to pronounce each syllable of an individual word. The PowerTouch sounds out the entire word. The LeapFrog library of over 70 books gives it much more depth. Advantage LeapPad.

The bottom line? The PowerTouch is easier to use, but the LeapPad has more depth and variety in design. Both deliver well designed activities that are very strong educationally. The starting package comes with two eight page starter books. Ernie's Neighborhood is an early reader, and School Skills contains one activity for each grade (K, 1, 2). Additional books will come with ROM cartridges cost \$15. The PowerTouch runs on four AA batteries.

### Pretend and Learn Shopping Cart

✓ **Runs on** Smart Toy (Requires 2 "C" batteries) 4.3 ★★★★★<sup>1/2</sup>  
LeapFrog, 800-701-5327, [www.leapfrog.com](http://www.leapfrog.com)  
2002, \$45.95, ages 2-up 123-456789

✓ **Teaches** fantasy play, one-to-one correspondence, food labels, language

This shopping cart works just like the real thing-- push it around, and fill it with objects and groceries. This one, however, also comes with ten plastic shopping items to scan using the small plastic scanner that's connected to the cart's middle. Children simply touch the scanner's base to the object and the toy announces what it is. Scan a bunch of bananas, and children hear, "three yellow bananas". A Game mode asks for several items at once to make dinner, and a Learn mode sings a brief counting song after each scan. The toy is very responsive and works nicely with traditional fantasy play patterns. Our toddler and preschool testers loved it. Even toddlers enjoyed pushing the cart and putting the objects in and out (their parents only wished for a flashing light when scanning). They appreciated the toy sturdy build and wide wheels that support a young child's climbing and pushing.

### Putt-Putt: Pep's Birthday Surprise

✓ **Runs on** Windows XP 4.3 ★★★★★<sup>1/2</sup>  
Atari, 978-921-3700, [www.atari.com](http://www.atari.com)  
2003, \$19.99, ages 4-7

✓ **Teaches** logical thinking

The seventh Putt-Putt title is based on the same tried and true formula-- kids drive Putt-Putt around Cartown, helping various residents, reaping rewards and gathering supplies for a birthday party for his dear dog Pep. Longtime Putt-Putt fans will notice the little car has a new voice, not quite as endearing as the original. But the graphics and gameplay remain true, and there are lots of places to explore and dilemmas to solve. For instance, kids have to figure out how to help a mother duck get her babies across a road (Hint-- Pep comes in handy for this task!). They'll also help Marvin the Magician find his lost hat, bring apples to the local grocer and gather ingredients for Pep's birthday cake. As they progress through the adventure, kids meet all kinds of characters-- all vehicles of some sort. Each has a task for Putt-Putt and a helpful item they'll give once the task is completed. It's an engaging format, like a scavenger hunt, that keeps children invested all the way to the end. As with other Putt-Putt titles, you can paint him with different colors, including (for the first time) transparent paint. In sum, this is a gentle, playful game that has kids using their memory and logical thinking.

### Putt-Putt Saves the Zoo

✓ **Runs on** Mac CD-ROM, Windows CD-ROM (plug & play) 4.5 ★★★★★<sup>1/2</sup>  
Humongous Entertainment, 800-791-7128, [www.humongous.com](http://www.humongous.com)  
1995, \$39.95, ages 3-7

✓ **Teaches** problem solving, logical thinking, animal facts, shapes

This is a cartoonish, scavenger hunt-style program in which children drive Putt-Putt the car around the paths in three zoo regions (the jungle, the arctic and the grasslands) in search of six missing baby animals. As they explore, kids find special items necessary to help the animals. For example, a rope found in an arctic snow bank must be taken into the jungle and lowered down a waterfall to rescue a trapped lion cub. Freeing a stranded hippo requires building a bridge of uniquely shaped icebergs and finding a shovel to clear away an avalanche. Unless the necessary special items are found, the animals remain lost and the zoo cannot open. Testers aged three and four became frustrated in their first few plays, and required adult assistance. Older children loved the program.

Especially enjoyable are the multilevel activities found around the zoo. In Animal Tag, kids must pay attention to detail as they match special animals that pop up at random from the Savannah. Other activities include six different information stations offering interesting animal facts like "hippos eat 100 pounds of grass for five hours each night". There's also a water-slide maze game that's just for fun and a camera option for printing out pictures of each animal.

### QX3+ Computer Microscope

✓ **Runs on** Windows, Macintosh 4.7 ★★★★★<sup>1/2</sup>  
Digital Blue, 888-800-0502, [www.playdigitalblue.com](http://www.playdigitalblue.com)  
1999, \$59.99, ages 6-up EVERYONE

✓ **Teaches** science, nature, using a microscope, creativity

This affordable, versatile microscope plugs into your computer's USB port and puts some of the latest digital imagery technology at the fingertips of even very young children. Kids will be amazed as they zoom up to 200 times in on a bug, or as they detach the microscope from its base to view the skin on their arm from the perspective of a hungry mosquito. The microscope comes with software that captures the images so that they can be made into a slide show, resized, or otherwise manipulated.

Strengths are the ease of use and versatility of the device. The microscope contains a light that is powered from the USB port, so no batteries are required, and there's even a built-in storage feature so that tweezers, slides and other accessories don't get misplaced. Weaknesses include a large installation, and the fact that you must have the CD-ROM in the drive in order to use the microscope. Also, we found that children's interest in the device fades rather quickly in a home setting. However, the microscope is so useful that it is likely to become a necessary family accessory, perfect for when a child finds a ladybug, or perhaps wants to examine the structure of a blade of grass. Teachers will find that while the software look and feel is for the home market, the capabilities are acceptable in a classroom.

The kit offers an excellent way to explore the world that can't be seen with the naked eye, and would be ideal for either home or school use. The Macintosh version requires an extra disk for \$20, containing a Mac version of the software and all the drivers for system 8.6 - 9.2 (not OSX).

### Reader Rabbit Math Pre K-3

✓ **Runs on** Win, Mac 4.8 ★★★★★

The Learning Company, 800-825-4420, [www.readerrabbit.com](http://www.readerrabbit.com)  
2001, \$call, ages 4-9

✓ **Teaches** math, counting, addition, subtraction, logic

A fantastic value, this entertaining three-program set offers solid math skill practice. Included are Reader Rabbit Math Ages 4-6, Reader Rabbit Math Ages 6-9 and Reader Rabbit Thinking Adventures. The Ages 4-6 title is set in an amusement park, and children play seven counting, addition and subtraction games to earn tickets for the rides and prize tent. With the Ages 6-9 program, children find themselves stranded on Pirate Island where they must play math activities to reassemble their ship. Skills covered here include computation, counting by tens and telling time. Logic is the focus of the Thinking Adventures CD where children join Rabbit and the gang in eight critical thinking exercises, many of which emphasize shapes, patterns and sequence. All three programs offer multiple difficulty levels and detailed progress reports. Because this is a school-bundle, the CDs come with a teacher resource binder, blackline masters and 26 lesson plans.

### Reader Rabbit Thinking Adventures Ages 4-6

✓ **Runs on** Win 95, 98; Mac OS (CD-ROM) 4.7 ★★★★★<sup>1/2</sup>

The Learning Company, 800-543-9778, [www.readerrabbit.com](http://www.readerrabbit.com)  
1999, \$29.95, ages 4-6

✓ **Teaches** logic, identifying patterns, following directions

"Hey--this computer said my name!" exclaims four-year-old Jenna, as she clicks on her name in the sign-in screen in this new CD. What Jenna doesn't know is that she's playing with some of the most sophisticated computer learning technology to date. Not only does this new Reader Rabbit title have the ability to remember and say 527 of the most common names in North America, but it can administer its own pretest. This lets parents or teachers fine-tune the set of eight activities to a particular child's abilities, before he or she starts playing. Each activity presents skills within entertaining themes. In one game, kids decorate cookies with sprinkles and frosting. In another, they have to identify the patterns and sequence of dancing mice. Parents can easily access detailed reports of what a child does in each activity. The entertaining activities were a real hit with testers.

### Reader Rabbit Toddler

✓ **Runs on** Win 95, Win 3.1, Mac OS (CD-ROM) 4.6 ★★★★★<sup>1/2</sup>

The Learning Company, 800-543-9778, [www.readerrabbit.com](http://www.readerrabbit.com)  
1997, \$29.95, ages 1 1/2-3

✓ **Teaches** colors, shapes, counting, alphabet

This variety pack of eight well-crafted activities provides playful experiences with early logic and language concepts. The program is extremely responsive and easy to use and offers many nice features. For example, parents can type in their toddler's name so that it shows up in the coloring activities. There are finger plays, shape and color games, counting activities and alphabet instruction. Testers, both children and parents alike, loved the colorful graphics, solid activities and gentle theme. Preschool teachers will appreciate that song lyrics and the words to nursery rhymes can be printed out. This is a classic program, a perfect computer introduction for your toddler.

**Reader Rabbit Toddler Deluxe**

✓ **Runs on** Win 95, 98; Mac OS (CD-ROM) 4.7 ★★★★★1/2  
 The Learning Company, 800-543-9778, www.readerrabbit.com  
 1999, \$29.95, ages 18 mos.-3 yrs. 0-7630-3128-3

✓ **Teaches** colors, mouse control, songs, shapes, etc.

The third edition of this pleasant program is just as good as the first. Our testers loved the colorful graphics and nine friendly activities. The CD's ease of use is a real strength as every movement of the mouse makes something happen on the screen. The activities cover a wide range of skills. Kids can learn colors and shapes by piecing together simple puzzles or can help baby animals find their parents by listening carefully to the sounds the animals make. Our testers' unanimous favorite activity is the one in which Reader Rabbit leads fingerplays-- the kids adore the music and the hand motions. A second CD with 17 songs is also included in the package.

This program was a winner with all of our toddler testers. One parent nicely describes her child's reaction to the program: "We purchased this program for Marissa when she was 13 months old and right from the beginning it captured and held her attention." A new version comes with a second CD that doesn't add much to the first.

**Rescue Heroes Billy Blazes**

✓ **Runs on** Game Boy Advance 4.6 ★★★★★1/2  
 Vivendi Universal Publishing (Knowledge, 310-649-8000, www.vugames.com  
 2003, \$29.99, ages 4-7

✓ **Teaches** spatial thinking, strategy

Here's a great theme--saving people from disasters-- combined with a tried-and-true format that kids find incredibly appealing. Your mission is to steer Billy Blazes (a firefighter) through eight maze-like levels such as "Animal Rescue" (putting out fires and saving animals or people). As Billy runs, children can switch his tools, which include a water hose, an ax, a ladder and so on. There are two levels: we recommend starting out as a rookie, unless you have the instruction manual in front of you. After each level, players are given a password (we would've preferred a sign-in method). Our preschool testers had no problem with the first level, and found the theme to be very fun; but they may want some help in levels 2-8, as things get pretty hard. Created by Wayforward Technology for Vivendi Universal. Hint: make sure nobody gets left behind in order to finish each level.

**Ruff's Bone**

✓ **Runs on** Win 95, Win 3.1, Mac OS (CD-ROM) 4.5 ★★★★★1/2  
 Brøderbund (The Learning Company), 800-716-8506, www.learningco.com  
 1994, \$19.95, ages 3-8

✓ **Teaches** reading: story elements

This is a twelve-screen storybook about a dog (Ruff) who is sent on a wild search for his bone. His efforts to find the treat take him into a hollow tree -- underground, to a jungle full of teasing monkeys, to outer space with singing clouds, and even under the sea. In all of the scenes, nearly any object the child clicks on moves, sings and dances, or is part of some kind of skit related to the bone. All of the objects in the story are meaningful to children - dogs, cars, clouds, birds and monkeys - making this excellent for younger children.

There are two modes of play: "read to me", in which the computer "plays" the story with no interaction; and "let me play." Although the "let me play" mode lets children turn the pages and click on objects, they must wait for the page to be narrated before making their selection. Our younger testers found this wait frustrating as they were anxious to get to their favorite animation (it is possible for adults to skip the narration by pressing a combination of keys). Similarly, child-testers found it difficult to skip pages. A tool allowing children to quickly move from page to page would have been useful, such as a sliding bookmark at the edge of the picture.

Even with these design problems, Ruff's Bone is a very enjoyable Living Book with clever animations and a great storyline that can be set for English or Spanish. In case you're wondering, Ruff finds his bone and returns it to his master ... only to have it thrown away again. The program also makes a nice bedtime story.

**Sammy's Science House**

✓ **Runs on** Windows CD-ROM, Mac CD-ROM 4.7 ★★★★★1/2  
 Edmark (Riverdeep), 800-426-0856, www.edmark.com  
 1994, \$19.95, ages 2-5

✓ **Teaches** weather, logic, sequencing, classifying, animals

If your child likes Millie's Math House, Thinkin' Things and Bailey's Book House, he or she is sure to love this science program hosted by Sammy Snake. Although it may be more a program of logic than science, the five enjoyable activities are well-designed and entertaining.

In one game, children slide a variety of puzzle parts together to create objects; another activity has them classifying animals according to attributes. Kids also practice their thinking skills as they sequence pre-made movies and watch them on the screen, or adjust weather conditions to see them acted out on television. Another interesting but less popular activity lets children observe the wild life and scenery at Acorn Pond while manipulating the seasons.

Child testers as young as age two found the program very easy to use and played with it for long periods of time. They particularly liked the sliding puzzle, animal sorting and film sequencing activities. When kids had trouble, help was provided in clever ways. The puzzle maker provides a model, the containers used for animal sorting cover their tops when an incorrect animal is selected, and the film sequencer repositions pictures for children having trouble. Children's least favorite activity was Acorn Pond as the game is less active and uses limited animation. Overall, though, this program offers engaging content that really gets kids thinking.

**Sesame Street Baby & Me**

✓ **Runs on** Win 95, 98; Mac OS (CD-ROM) 4.6 ★★★★★1/2  
 The Learning Company, 800-543-9778, www.learningco.com  
 1999, \$29.95, ages 1-3

✓ **Teaches** songs, cause and effect, colors, shapes, seasons

Thoughtfully designed, this pleasant program starring the Sesame Street gang is meant to be played by parent and child together. When the baby or toddler uses the mouse, the grown-up provides back-up assistance with the keyboard, or vice versa. The child's actions make things happen in the activities while the adult's keystrokes or mouse clicks navigate from one activity to the next. Children can play peek-a-boo with Ernie, sing songs with Elmo, learn about numbers with Big Bird and color pictures with Zoe. Other games introduce letters, animal sounds and seasons. Cause and effect is emphasized over and over again-- when children move the mouse or tap a key, something exciting happens on the screen. Most impressive is the depth of content in comparison to other baby and toddler software.

**Story Reader**

✓ **Runs on** Smart Toy 4.3 ★★★★★1/2  
 Publications International, Ltd., 847-676-3470, (not available)  
 2003, \$19.99, ages 3-up

✓ **Teaches** reading

Back in the olden days, educators dreamed of a day when children's books would read themselves. That's pretty much what happens with this new book reader. This is more "low tech" than you might think. After placing a book and ROM cartridge in the reader, children merely open it to turn it on. The story is read aloud, page by page. The unit has auto page recognition (using magnets taped to each page) so no matter what page the child turns to, that's what's heard. The unit comes with one story-- The Lion King. Additional stories and cartridges are sold separately (\$10 each) and include Toy Story and various children's classics like Pinocchio, Bambi and Peter Pan (sold in sets of three for \$22). We found the unit to be responsive, and the narration and background music is pleasant. There isn't any interactivity beyond turning the pages, but good stories like these just require listening. A headphone jack is available, and the volume control is good.

**Stuart Little: His Adventures in Numberland**

✓ **Runs on** Win 4.6 ★★★★★<sup>1/2</sup>  
 SuperMentor.com, Inc., 800-474-4423, www.supermentor.com  
 2001, \$29.95, ages 4-7

✓ **Teaches** early math, numbers sequence, patterns, counting, addition, base 10  
 Children use the mouse to fly Stuart Little around Numberland, a whimsical 3D environment containing 11 clever math puzzles. The games provide playful experimentation with quantitative concepts that include number lines, addition, subtraction, place value, base ten and early geometric thinking. There are simple games, like dot-to-dot puzzles, as well as more complex activities. In Bee's Toy Store, kids help a shopkeeper count out items for customers by ones or twos, and the Dinoroo's Bridge Game offers a great counting activity for one or two players. The games are especially noteworthy for the way in which they actively engage children with number concepts... this is the kind of software that can really make a difference for a child. For their successes, children are rewarded with Brain Power points. Kids can take these points to an Imagination Machine and make new toys for the toy shop. Our testers, who were familiar with the older Piggy in Numberland title, found the activities to be engaging, and liked the fact that they could save their games or play with other children in the two player activities.

Take note that aside from the different lead character and the ability to save games, the program is nearly identical to its 1998 predecessor, Piggy in Numberland. The CD was developed by a team of psychologists and teachers from UCLA, who set out to create software that could provide a playful, highly responsive mathematics playground. We think they succeeded. Please see Stuart Little Learning Adventures (released in 2002) which includes this program.

**Talking Word Factory, The (Video VHS and DVD)**

✓ **Runs on** DVD, VHS 4.8 ★★★★★  
 LeapFrog, 800-701-5327, www.leapfrog.com  
 2004, \$10, ages 4-6

✓ **Teaches** early reading, letter sounds, blends, vowels

This animated cartoon tells the story of Tad (a struggling reader) and his search for help in order to fill out a contest entry form. This search leads him, his brother and sister to the Letter Factory, where letters are glued together to form words for a dictionary. Letters are introduced in a fun way (the letter W is introduced by a group of rap musicians) and the tricky concepts of vowels and blends are also nicely presented (vowels are coated with sticky stuff, because they are the "glue" that holds words together) making this a great pre-reading resource for either home or school. Note that this is the second in a series, following The Letter Factory, and has a more sophisticated plot. In the end, the form is filled out, and Tad wins the contest -- the perfect happy ending. The DVD version includes a simple interactive letter quiz, that asks "Can you find the letter to make the word Let" in which correct answers are rewarded with an animation.

**Teletubbies 2**

✓ **Runs on** Win 95, 98 (CD-ROM) 4.5 ★★★★★<sup>1/2</sup>  
 Knowledge Adventure, 800-545-7677, www.knowledgeadventure.com  
 1999, \$30.00, ages 1-4

✓ **Teaches** early learning, music, colors, numbers, matching

This second Teletubby program based on the BBC television show is much, much better than the first. TinkyWinky and the rest of the gang host five engaging activities. In Making Tubby Custard, for instance, children help the characters run the custard machine so that all the friends get a nice big bowl. This takes a bit of logic and perseverance, but it's fun. Another activity, Teletubby Gymnastics, lets children pick the music and moves for an exercise routine. The software includes a printable coloring book and entertaining videos of real kids making playdoh and preparing for a festival. The overall feel of the program is quite unique when compared to other preschool programs, due in large part to the bold 3D graphics and animation, which match that of the TV show.

**The Little Raven & Friends: The Tricycle Story**

✓ **Runs on** Win, Mac 4.4 ★★★★★<sup>1/2</sup>  
 Viva Media (formerly Tivola), 877-848-6520, www.viva-media.com  
 2002, \$19.99, ages 3-up EARLY CHILDHOOD 1-932174-03-6

✓ **Teaches** social skills, colors, shapes, patterns, problem solving, English,  
 When Little Raven borrows a friend's tricycle without asking permission, he crashes into a tree and wrecks the bike. Players must then decide whether or not to tell Little Raven's buddy the truth about what happened. If kids tell him to lie, Little Raven must sit in the timeout tree. Children are encouraged to have Little Raven tell the truth and make amends for his actions by collecting and reassembling the trike pieces. All through this gentle, slow-paced adventure, kids are given choices about how to interact with others, and depending on what they choose, the story twists and turns in different ways. Mini games like bug catching and hide and seek are interspersed and well integrated into the story line. The whole experience is quite lovely, reminiscent of the Living Books. The program's graphics and use of humor are wonderful; and Little Raven talks and acts just like a regular little kid, so he's easy to relate to. Impatient players used to flashy multimedia bells and whistles may find this too much like a picture book come to life, and it is bothersome that you can't always click through narration. Still, we highly recommend this title, especially for its notable and uncommon theme.

**ThemeWeavers: Animals**

✓ **Runs on** Win, Mac OS (CD-ROM) 4.4 ★★★★★<sup>1/2</sup>  
 Edmark (Riverdeep), 800-426-0856, www.edmark.com  
 2000, \$59.95, ages 3-7 1-56926-751-0

✓ **Teaches** reading, math, creativity, science, social studies, art

Billed as an "essential companion for theme-based teaching," this useful program provides dozens of pre-made activity templates and creativity tools for making your own worksheets and activities. The idea is to use students' fascination for animals to teach skills like rhyming words, opposites, counting and habitats. The premade activity templates, which can be completed onscreen or printed out, are offered in several subject areas including math, language arts, science and social studies. Everything is customizable so that teachers can use the templates to teach the weekly spelling words, for instance, or hone in on other specific skills. The plentiful artwork choices feature hundreds of animated stickers, and creativity tools that are easy to use. Other programs are planned in the series and will include content focused on Nature and Community.

**Thomas & Friends The Great Festival Adventure**

✓ **Runs on** Win 95, 98 (CD-ROM) 4.3 ★★★★★<sup>1/2</sup>  
 Atari, 978-921-3700, www.atari.com  
 1999, \$19.95, ages 2-up 1-58228-135-1

✓ **Teaches** listening, following directions, problem solving, colors, shapes

Kids help Thomas the Tank Engine and his friends prepare for a big festival. There are trains to clean and repair, tracks to clear and freight to load. Graphics, sound effects and overall responsivity are just great, making the experience a positive one for young computer users. While playing kids must use their listening and problem-solving skills. They also practice shape recognition, colors, counting and sorting. Our two- to four-year-old testers really enjoyed the program and played it repeatedly. Older kids liked it the first time through, but a limited range of challenge stopped them from coming back for more.

**Thomas & Friends: Thomas Saves the Day**

✓ **Runs on** Windows 4.0 ★★★★★  
 Atari, 978-921-3700, www.atari.com  
 2003, \$19.95, ages 4-7

✓ **Teaches** logic, memory

There's been a big storm and it's up to Thomas to fix things up. Children steer him through 11 locations in search of helpful items and logic puzzles. There is scattered cargo to retrieve, debris to be cleared, and damaged engines to repair. The graphics are true to the television show and help is available through narrator suggestions if children get stuck. The logic games can be played at three levels. Testers enjoyed playing the program, but lost interest after completing the adventure, which can be done in an hour or two. The bottom line? While nice looking, this may have some longevity issues.

**Tonka Firefighter**

✓ **Runs on** Windows XP 4.2 ★★★★★

Atari, 978-921-3700, [www.atarikids.com](http://www.atarikids.com)  
2003, \$19.99, ages 4-7

✓ **Teaches**

Drive four Tonka vehicles-- two fire trucks, a helicopter and a bull dozer-- to put out fires, perform rescue operations and clear debris. There are 12 tasks in all, each with three levels of difficulty. There are kittens to be rescued, firefighters to save and lots of blazing fires to squirt, which helps keep things interesting. Kids can also print out coloring pages and other printables and can design and execute their own on screen fireworks display. Graphics are fun, as are most of the activities. Driving the vehicles from one location can be cumbersome-- our testers always wanted to go faster than they were allowed. Certificates are earned for completing missions. All in all, although it won't knock your socks off, this is an engaging program, especially for Tonka fans.

**Tonka Town**

✓ **Runs on** Windows XP 4.5 ★★★★★1/2

Atari, 978-921-3700, [www.atari.com](http://www.atari.com)  
2003, \$19.99, ages 4-7

✓ **Teaches** spatial relations, logic, coloring, community helpers

Boys and girls will enjoy playing pretend trucks with this engaging Tonka-themed program. Driving around in vehicles like Chuck the Dump Truck and Hook 'n Ladder, they'll take care of important jobs such as collecting runaway tires, catching falling objects at a construction site, putting out fires, and more. The graphics are fun: when you drive over the grass you see tire marks for instance, and when you run into buildings they'll say "Ouch" or make some other comment. Everything is "alive", including trucks, parking meters and trees --at theme that children especially relate to. There are four vehicles that can be driven, an in-game map system, and an area for printing certificates and coloring pages. Driving the vehicles is easy and the program is responsive, and the pro-social emphasis on helping friends is a nice touch. All-in-all, this is great fun, and will work well in either home or preschool classroom settings.

**Tortoise and the Hare, The**

✓ **Runs on** Win 95, Win 3.1, Mac OS (CD-ROM) 4.5 ★★★★★1/2

Brøderbund (The Learning Company), 800-716-8506, [www.learningco.com](http://www.learningco.com)  
1993, \$19.95, ages 3-8

✓ **Teaches** reading

A 12-page animated storybook. Children turn pages while listening to the story and play with animals, words, or objects along the way. Engaging animation. Our testers of all ages loved it. English or Spanish. Highly recommended.

**Travel the World with Timmy**

✓ **Runs on** Win 3.1, Win 95, Mac OS (CD-ROM) 4.3 ★★★★★1/2

Edmark (Riverdeep), 800-426-0856, [www.edmark.com](http://www.edmark.com)  
1997, \$29.95, ages 4-7

1-56926-487-2

✓ **Teaches** reading, foreign language, creativity, music

In October of 1998, Travel the World with Timmy Deluxe was released. Here is the review of the original 1997 version.

While "visiting" Argentina, Japan and Kenya, children are exposed to different cultures and can bone up on their reading and foreign language skills at the same time. A friendly alligator hosts the program and in each locale, kids can play games, sing songs, compose stories and create arts and crafts related to the region. There are eighteen activities in all. The program does an excellent job of introducing children to foreign languages via its songs and activities. It would make a perfect supplement to a classroom unit on social studies and is also fun enough for homes. Weaknesses are minor and include problematic erasing in the arts and crafts section.

**Wizmo's Workshop: The Dragons of Frozzbokk**

✓ **Runs on** Win 4.3 ★★★★★1/2

Hasbro Interactive/Infogrames, 978-921-3001, [www.hasbro-interactive.com](http://www.hasbro-interactive.com)  
2002, \$19.99, ages 3-6 EVERYONE

✓ **Teaches** colors, shapes, sequencing and letter sounds

This program's fabulous graphics and animations dazzled testers and reviewers alike. Everything in Wizard Wizmo's workshop appears to be alive. Characters are always moving, screens are overflowing with clickable animations, and effects are generous. Six activities, focused on colors, shapes, sequencing and letter sounds, are found via rainbow-colored pointing portholes, and a readily available exit icon lets kids easily exit games (although they have to click "yes" as well). Some of the games are excellent, like the highly responsive target shooting games that ask kids to find objects and animals with particular attributes. Also unusually good is an open-ended art activity that lets children decorate pages with bright and colorful shapes and objects. Particularly child-friendly, the program lets kids easily move between pages, select art tools and print pictures. Responsivity is sometimes an issue, particularly in a picture concentration game that is weakened by uninterruptible character comments. All things considered, however, this refreshing set of activities reels the kids in.