Children can get frustrated if they can’t figure out what to do straight away. As with any other toy, spend a bit of time working it out for yourself so that you can show your child. Most are quick learners and will soon know their way around.

This support is not just about showing a child how to use a particular device – things like which buttons to use on the remote control, how to access a game on the play laptop or how to scroll down a page on a website. Supporting your child is also about sharing in the experience - showing interest, asking questions, laughing at jokes, making suggestions, or just being there. This support doesn’t always have to be provided by a parent or caregiver. Perhaps there’s an older brother or sister that can be enlisted to help if they can be trusted not to take over completely.

Know what your child is doing
It’s fine to set up your child with an electronic toy designed for preschoolers while you get on with something else for a while, but you need to be on hand to help out if they need it. Try to stay within earshot and keep an eye on what they’re doing.

Some parents of four-year-olds will tell you that children have an affinity for technology and they pick it up so fast that it’s a struggle to keep one step ahead. Others think that it isn’t right for children to be playing with technology when they could be playing outside or reading a book. These parents don’t like the idea of children growing up looking at screens instead of playing with friends.

Who’s right? Parents tend to have lots of questions about their young child’s play with computers, mobile phones, games consoles and toys such as play laptops or interactive pets. They can find it difficult to know what’s best because these toys and products weren’t around when they were children.

There isn’t a ‘right’ answer. There’s no research that proves once and for all that technology is either good or bad for young children, so it seems safe to say that balance is the key. Parents’ and caregivers’ views on what seems to be the right balance of play with and without technology can vary from one family to another depending on what’s important to them.

Here are some things to think about when getting the balance right for your family.

Getting started
Children enjoy exploring technological products so adults tend to think that they are naturals. But children often need support until their level of familiarity means that they can become independent users. The main way to interact with many computer games, websites and electronic toys is still by reading instructions and entering letters or numbers to get a response. That’s a major challenge for preschoolers who are in the early stages of learning to read and write. Some products have fiddly controls. They can be difficult to use for young children who find it difficult to make precise movements with their fingers.
If your child is playing on a website, preschoolers’ limited reading and writing skills make straying into unsuitable sites less likely than might be the case for older brothers and sisters. But this is the time to establish good habits, so encourage your child to talk to you about what they’re doing. Use the parental controls to block certain types of content and to keep track of your child’s browsing. You can also make a folder of links to favourite websites and teach your child the icons that identify them. This gives your child some choice, but within the boundaries that you have set.

**Getting the balance right**

For preschool children, technological play is just one of a range of activities they engage in on their own or with others. They don’t usually make a distinction between technological and traditional toys in the way that adults do.

There’s no doubt that technology is an important feature of family life in many households and most children use some form of device with a screen every day. Computers can be used for a range of child-friendly activities, such as going on CBeebies, Nick Jr., Club Penguin and Bin Weevils websites, looking at funny clips on YouTube with other family members, watching missed television programmes or talking to relatives via Skype or MSN Messenger.

If you feel that your child is too young to be on the computer, then provide other things to do that will seem attractive. Don’t worry if they’re just not very interested in technology and prefer traditional toys or art and craft activities – that’s OK, too. Your child might enjoy dressing up, playing with toys or running around outside. You probably wouldn’t want them to spend all their time on any one of these activities. The same goes for the computer, so encourage them to try a range of things.

There are lots of technologies besides computers that are attractive to young children so it’s worth thinking about some alternatives. Low cost digital cameras provide lots of opportunities for creativity and communication without needing writing skills. You might want to teach your child how to use a remote control so that they can find the section they like on a DVD and replay it without needing to ask for help. Some children like toys such as play laptops, cash registers and electronic pets. You could borrow a toy from your local toy library to see if it’s likely to be a success before spending money on it.

Toys don’t need to cost a lot. Try giving them your old devices that don’t work any more so that they can use them in role play. A non-functioning mobile phone can lead to imaginary conversations with friends and relatives, an old computer can be a prop for playing pretend schools or offices, a discarded MP3 player can play make-believe music.

**What are children learning?**

Some of the interactive products available for young children claim to be educational, often aimed at getting children ready for school by including activities designed to help children read, write and use numbers. Some children like these play laptops and tablet computers. They use them for role play and like the learning exercises. Other children prefer to learn with traditional magnetic letters, play clocks and books.

It’s just a matter of finding what your child prefers. But don’t forget, technological toys aren’t just about educational games and activities. It’s OK just to have some fun, too. Most schools work on the basis that children haven’t had much use of computers when they first get there, so your child won’t be disadvantaged if that’s not their choice at home.

Children’s early experiences of playing and learning with the various technologies available to them at home can contribute to positive learning experiences, particularly when children are helped to make sense of them by supportive adults or older children who monitor their activities, discuss their encounters with them, help when things get difficult and provide encouragement and praise for achievements. This is no different to the ways in which children learn from other kinds of experiences and activities that they encounter in their early years.

**Balance and boundaries**

Advice gets issued from time to time that children under a certain age should not be exposed to computers or television because this will be detrimental both at the time and later in life. But proving a link to the problems that children might experience in their development is difficult when there are so many different factors in a child’s upbringing to take into account.

Young children’s experiences with digital technologies differ considerably from one family to another: nearly all children watch television and DVDs, but they vary in their enthusiasm for activities such as playing video games, surfing the web, or playing with interactive dolls and pets. Some children are keen to play with these things; others have little or no interest.

Parents generally agree that it is important for young children to balance technological activities with more traditional games, books and outdoor play. Most parents feel that they have got the balance about right for their own children. This can change: we know that some parents do become concerned about their older children’s interest in computer and video games. The early childhood years are therefore a good time to establish the boundaries that feel right for you and your child and to provide a wide range of toys and activities.

**For further information contact:**

British Toy & Hobby Association, 80 Camberwell Rd, London SE5 0EG, 020 7717 7271. View the full range of NTC leaflets at www.btha.co.uk.

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