



cyber chat



By **Dr. Barbara Spears**

Welcome to Cyberchat #3 When I was flying to Melbourne recently, a mother and her small daughter moved into the seats next to me. Within a minute or two, the little one was trying to release the tray on the back of the seat. At the same time, she was pushing the volume buttons on the seat armrest and asking her mother, "Nemo? Nemo? Nemo?" No explanation was required. I was in the presence of a techno-savvy tot.

As I watched this child of less than two years of age reach for technology that was not available in the plane in which we were sitting, I reflected on the role of technology in our lives, but more so, in the lives of our very youngest citizens.

Obviously, tech-savvy tots are everywhere. They learn through play in the same ways they have always done. They click and press phones, cameras and computers and are rewarded with something novel, which reinforces their behaviour, and they learn to repeat the sequence. Have a look on You Tube, at the babies who are playing with technology. These are the children beginning school in the next three to five years. They will come to school with levels of media and technological literacy that have not been seen before. But does that necessarily mean that they are more savvy than adults, in the truest sense of the word? Do they know more? Or are they simply unfazed by technology and embrace it without fear and play with it? As we ponder the tech-tot growing into school age, what could they be doing online during that time?

The earliest programs are designed to protect your computer against 'keyboard bangers', so that when your little one reaches up and bangs on the keyboard, your files are not accidentally deleted http://www.kidsdomain.com/reviews/kdr/_keyboardbangers-index.html; <http://www.mini123.com/>. Companies overseas

are already marketing computer classes for 2 - 7 yr olds. The iPhone is another visual learning tool; there are apps for learning phonics such as pocketphonics <http://www.appsinmypocket.com/index.html>. Technology education for early childhood is an important consideration and one early report recognises that technology has a place, but advocates for finding a balance across all learning and play: http://educationnorthwest.org/webfm_send/458.

Sites such as these offer an entrée into the early learning possibilities online: <http://www.juliasrainbowcorner.com/>; <http://www.starfall.com/>; <http://www.storyplace.org/>; <http://www.larryloveand.com/>; <http://www.studydog.com/>; <http://www.tuxpaint.org/>; <http://www.wartoft.nu/software/sebran/>; <http://www.kidsmartearlylearning.org/EN/index.html>

Of course there are our Australian sites, such as: <http://www.cybersmart.gov.au/en/Young%20Kids.aspx>; <http://www.youngmedia.org.au/mediachildren/index.htm>; <http://www.edna.edu.au/edna/go/ece/cache/offonce;jsessionid=E8867649A22CDE04B448BB95E766643A>;

The real issue is, what are we doing to help them learn safe and socially appropriate ways of engaging with technology? Technology is akin to the swimming pool in our backyard. We don't just let our children dive in the deep end without first giving them some swimming lessons and safety skills. Sites such as those which actively teach social networking skills and appropriate behaviours are important to consider <http://www.superclubsplus.com.au/>. The following government website also lists sites appropriate for children <http://australia.gov.au/people/children>.

To revisit the child on the plane next to me: here was a child who had obviously done a lot of international travel, and

was expecting to watch her favourite film in transit and be entertained by the images and story. She knew that there was supposed to be a screen in front of her, and a console to manipulate it. But she was equally satisfied with the picture book that her mother pulled out and read to her. I watched as they pointed to the pictures and listened as her mother explained them and talked about the story. It is this balance which we need to bring to our young children: time online, time together, time playing and exploring together and alone, but with boundaries that are developmentally appropriate. When children are little, we can have sharing and exploring time online as a natural progression - just like reading the book together, we can sit with them, guide them and learn together.

The difference for our teenagers, is that we did not have the luxury of guiding them when they were little, as the technology was not as readily available, but more importantly, it has taken off in ways we could never have imagined. They have dived in the deep end of the pool, and we have been caught on the sidelines, trying to catch up, throwing out safety lines and helping them learn how to swim.

Won't it be interesting when our tech-savvy tots become tech-savvy teens, and eventually tech-savvy parents? What will be in store for schools and education then? ●.....

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