



By Kevin Cullen

aged 5 and 7, like to play pachinko on the home computer, but they love riding bikes and bouncing on the backyard trampoline with friends.

"After a half hour on the computer, they're bored with it," says Anderson of Lafayette.

Many moms aren't so lucky. One of the hot-button issues facing families involves kids and the computer—how long they can use the thing and what they can view.

Filtering software has been around for years. Anderson uses Microsoft's "parental controls" feature to make sure her girls aren't seeing things they shouldn't.

But a priceless commodity is involved, too: time. The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends that children not be allowed more than two hours of "screen time" daily—which includes TV, computers and video games.

New software called ComputerTime lets parents set limits on how long each child spends on the PC. When the time's up, the kid is logged off automatically. The computer also can be disabled entirely.

Left to their own devices, many children will waste countless hours instant-messaging, surfing the Net and playing computer games, says Joe Acunzo, CEO and co-founder of the parent company, SoftwareTime, of Brounford, Conn.

"Necessity is the mother of invention," Acunzo says in a phone interview with the *Journal and Courier*. "My teenager was an in-



Photo provided by Joe Acunzo, CEO and co-founder of SoftwareTime, developed ComputerTime, a software program that controls the amount of time kids can spend on the Internet.

stant-messaging addict. She has a computer in her room that is hers to use, and late in the evening, on school nights, I would see the glow of the computer monitor under her door.

"I'd march in at midnight and say, 'I will have to remove that computer entirely if this doesn't stop.' It was very frustrating," he says.

"I hate to admit it, but I have gone in and yanked the power cord out of the wall and said, 'That's it! You're done!'" Acunzo says.

Many parents told Acunzo they have the same problem, so he searched the software market for a product that would limit time spent on a PC. Finding none, he decided to develop ComputerTime, which was introduced in late 2004.

His daughter's computer now gives her a warning at 9:45 p.m. and again at 9:55 p.m. on school nights. It automatically logs her off at 10 p.m.

By controlling access, the software allows parents to be present when children are on the Internet.

To reward good behavior, a parent can give the child a four-digit code, or "token," which allows another hour of screen time.

"It's had a wonderful, calming effect on our household," Acunzo says.

"The other issue it addresses is sharing the computer fairly in the household," he says. "Little Johnny gets it from 4 to 5, Susie gets it from 6 to 8. It stops that kicking around siblings."

Some parents mistakenly think their children are learning important job skills by spending much of their free time on a computer, according to a February 2003 article in the *American Academy of Pediatrics News*.

In reality, they're playing computer games, checking e-mail and wasting hours in chat rooms, according to Dr. Andrew Spooner, chair of the AAP's steering committee on clinical information technology.

"I haven't found many kids that are addicted to it (the computer) because they are working on a science project," Dr. David Kaplan, chair of the association's committee on adolescence, told the magazine.

Some aren't doing their homework, he said, and many are sleep deprived.

In addition, 25 percent of youngsters who use the Internet report being subjected involuntarily to pornography, according to the AAP. Twenty percent said they had been solicited sexually online, according to a University of New Hampshire survey.

Arnold Clinic pediatrician Dr. Linnette Woodman says that at

FYI

For more information about ComputerTime, visit this Web site: www.softwaretime.com. The software costs \$39.95, with a free 14-day download. The Web site for the American Academy of Pediatrics can be found at www.aap.org.

least 15 percent of children aged 6 to 11 are overweight, and physical inactivity is a major contributor.

"We want kids to interact with their parents, play outside, be active reading and do more physical activity," she says. "When I recommend limiting screen time, parents say to the children, 'Oh, did you hear that?'"

"I think it is probably not as good for their socialization if they are on a computer all the time," she says. "That's not to say that a computer can't be very valuable in education. We also worry about what kinds of games they are playing."

Kathy Rider, a student at Ivy Tech State College, has a 13-year-old stepson and a 7-year-old daughter.

"We regulate TV and video time," she says. "They have to have their schoolwork and chores done first."

Dan Boeber, of Lebanon, says he feels "torn" by wanting his daughter to have access to computer technology and his desire to protect her from its negative effects.

"You have to give a child some freedom and a certain amount of trust and leeway," he says. "But a

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pop-up on the Internet can give a child something he was not intended to look at."

He says he favors using filters until a child is about 8. "A lot of it falls back on parenting," Boeber says. "The parents

need to teach beliefs and values first. Then they will respect that and carry that on."

Too much screen time, he says, "keeps them away from physical activity, so parents could set a limit," he says.

"You set down the rules of the household and give them a certain amount of time watching TV or using the Internet. If you raise the kid right he will respect the rules."

Too often, Boeber says, "many parents want technology to do the parenting for them."

Obesity associated with too much screen time is especially common in late childhood and the early teenage years, says Dr. Gerald Wehr of Sigma Medical Group, Lafayette.

He specializes in pediatric and adolescent medicine. The key, he says, is for the child to get at least 45 minutes of "good physical activity" each day and cut back on junk food.

Using a computer for schoolwork and recreation is part of life for most students.

But squandering hours and hours playing games and instant-messaging friends "decreases the time they are spending on intellectual activities like reading and doing their homework," Wehr says. "They should be more productive than being an expert on video games."

Developmentally, he says, "face-to-face interaction is better than interaction with chat lines."

Photo illustration by Michael Heiser/Journal and Courier



Anderson



Acunzo



Rider



Boeber