

# Technology

## Keyboard for youngsters makes them more like us



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Cribbnotes

Instinct is at work inside the mind of the contemporary child as she approaches a computer keyboard.

Toddlers too young to understand the purpose of such a complex device nevertheless display a strangely intuitive comfort. They press, paw and pound on the keys, then gaze upward to the screen in a deliberate study of cause and effect.

It's evidence of an evolving brain.

The only problem with all of this preschool computer train-

ing is the impact of all that pawing and pounding on your rather delicate computer keyboard.

Witness those tiny, peanut butter encrusted hands hammering down on the keys, nailing the delete button as they erase hours of work and you begin to rethink the value of early childhood education.

The modern alternative to child-induced computer destruction is a keyboard made exclusively for the indelicate physical sensibilities of youngsters.

The \$80 Comfy EasyPC Keyboard ([www.comfyland.com](http://www.comfyland.com)) is designed especially for the pre-literate, button-bashing crowd. Instead of letters and numbers, the device's 20 large keys are labelled with pictures and colours that instantly draw the attention of young eyes.

While the idea of a keyboard toy isn't particularly new, the technological advancement

here involves software and a USB cable that taps into the processing power of a real computer (PC only. No Mac compatibility here).

The result is an engaging bit of childish computing in which the touch of a button triggers on-screen images of a dancing piano, a happy-faced puppy and an oddly hypnotic snail.

As little fingers press each button, animated characters sing, dance, and laugh on the screen.

Your regular word processing, Internet-surfing keyboard remains tucked away from peanut-butter-pounding danger.

Predictably, the device has made its way into the hands of celebrity offspring including those of people such as Courtney Cox, Reese Witherspoon and Johnny Depp — an indication of the high-end marketing chic behind Comfy.

For the purposes of review, it

has also made its way into the boxer-like hands of my one-year-old daughter.

She — who once spent her days devising elaborate strategies for turning my keyboard into a punching bag — quickly changed direction when presented with the far more visually friendly Comfy device.

Ever the delicate little princess, she clobbers the big, round keys, then stops to gaze at the computer screen as an array of images appear before her in response to the mauling.

A high-pitched animated flute, with its delicate tune and wide eyes, garners a rhythmic nodding of my daughter's head along with this observational utterance: "Flute funny, Daddy."

A series of buttons labelled only with colours inspires less attention. Her current belief that everything in the world is the colour blue has not yet been

dampened by the software's repeated guidance to the contrary. Yellow, green and purple may appear. But ask her what colour any of them are and her answer remains firm: "Blue."

It seems there may be no computerized cure for genetic stubbornness.

The device's designers — including a team of child psychologists — have developed a series of software titles to go with the keyboard aimed at children aged one to five.

The so-called First Steps title, which comes with the device, dispenses its childish wisdom in a remarkable 16 different languages, including such unlikely options as Norwegian, Turkish, Polish and Romanian.

When your child begins to outgrow its simple keystroke pearls — which may happen well before the recommended age of three — you can upgrade the device with

more advanced material.

Additional titles, with names such as World of Colors, Joy of Music, Animal World and Time Travel, sell for \$25.

ComfyWare Ltd., the Israeli manufacturer, claims its keyboard helps children acquire motor and sensory, language, cognitive, emotional and social skills. Such assertions are beyond our ability to quantify.

But spend time watching a child interact with the device's character-driven software and it's hard not to concede something interesting is happening.

Their eyes stare into the alluring glow of the computer screen. Neurons fire. Creativity unfolds. There's an almost tangible connection forming between child and machine.

They become like us.

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