Limiting Computer Use for Kids

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Limiting the amount of time your kids spend on the computer can be a challenge, but it doesn't need to be full of tears and tantrums. Consider implementing some basic strategies for tracking and limiting time, and don't be afraid to let your kids know that getting off the computer when requested is a prerequisite for using it the next time around.

Age-Appropriate Suggestions for Computer Time

These are some age-based suggestions on how much time is appropriate to spend on a computer per day.

These are maximum amounts and may be limited further by family values, outside activities, TV time, behavior, etc. You also may increase the amounts slightly on the weekend, or as a reward.

- **Infants:** If you use the computer with your infant, you'll want to keep it to a minimum. 10 or 15 minutes of baby/parent computer time is more than enough for them.

- **Toddlers/Preschool:** Kids in this age need a lot of different types of activities to grow and learn. 30 minutes on the computer is plenty, ideally with parental involvement.

- **Elementary School:** 30 to 45 minutes of free play, with extra time allotted for school work or long-term involved projects, if necessary.

- **Junior High/Middle School:** Start with an hour during the week, if time permits, with the possibility for some extra time on weekends. Additional time allowed for school work, running a business or an involved project, if necessary.

- **High School:** Two hours per day, where some days might be more and some less. Additional time allotted for homework and constructive activities (such as building an online business).

How to Limit the Time

These suggestions are primarily geared towards kids not yet in high school. As your children get older, you'll need to work on building a relationship of trust with them over their time spent on the computer. Good computing habits established earlier in life with help with this.

- **Use the software.** Check to see if the software has something built in that track the time used. Windows Vista has parental controls that allow you to set when a child can use the computer. You'll need to add user profiles to use this feature.
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- **Use hardware.** Consider if a hardware-based timer such as BOB from Hopscotch Technology is right for your family. These will manually shut off a monitor or TV to limit computer/game use. This is best for older kids or as a last resort as it doesn't give time to properly save an activity.
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- **Set a timer.** Make sure that it has an alarm that you and your child can hear. For younger kids, you'll want one that will help them see how much time is left.
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- **Use music.** Select a handful of favorite songs so that the length of the music equals the amount of computer time your kids get. Burn it to a CD and use to help your kids track their computer time.
- **Say it in a fun way.** Send older kids an IM when their time is up, or send a text message.
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- **Put it on paper.** Use an old-fashioned paper chart to mark off computer time for each child in the house. This can help with arguments over whose turn it is.

Making the Transition Easier

- Let your kids know how much time they have in advance. Help younger kids understand with visual clues, such as a timer, or an analog clock.

- Make sure that the time they have is reasonable for the activity they are doing. It's frustrating to just get started and then have to turn the computer off, so help them choose an appropriate game or activity based on their time allowance.

- Allow them to "bank" extra chunks of time so they can use it when they want to do something that is more involved. This is especially helpful as kids get older and will become more engaged with a game or project.