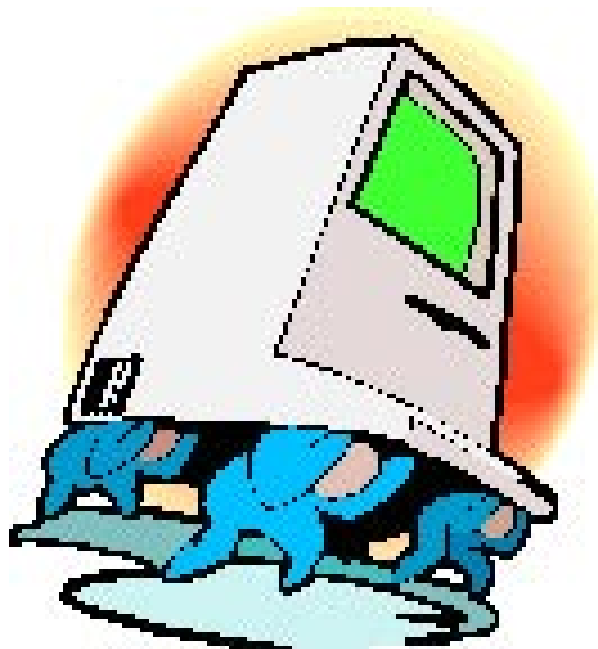




Buying a Computer for the Use of a Child with Additional Support Needs



CALL Information Sheet 4

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Why Buy a Computer?

Many parents buy a computer for their children to use. In the case of children with special needs, a computer can make a significant contribution to their development, particularly with regard to education and communication. It should also be fun to use!

Before you Buy

If you decide to buy a computer, there are a number of points to consider:

- Who will be using the computer – will it be used primarily by a child with special needs, or will other members of the family also use it?
- What other uses will there be for the computer – will it be used for “work”, typing letters, accessing the internet, general education or games?
- What computer is the child using at school?
- If the child has a physical disability, how will he / she access the computer, i.e. use the keyboard and mouse?
- What support is available if something goes wrong, or does not work in the way that is expected?

What's Available?

There are thousands of different computers available, all with different features. It is impossible to list everything, but, fortunately, it is possible to break things down into categories. The two main types of computer available are the PC and the Apple Macintosh.

The PC

The PC (Personal Computer) is a generic term for the vast range of computers compatible with the IBM PC. It will almost certainly be using some form of the Windows operating system, probably Windows XP, but possibly an earlier version of Windows, e.g. 98, Millennium or 2000. (The operating system is the basic structure that lets you control the computer – choosing programs to run, documents to print, games to play, etc.. It's what you see when you switch the computer on, but before you load any programs.) The PC is the most commonly used computer for business and is increasingly being used in schools.

Many different PCs are available, made by companies such as IBM, Dell, Mesh, Compaq, Packard Bell and Tiny. It is possible to get a basic PC for well under £500, while the latest “top of the range” computers can cost over £2,000.



Dell Dimension 3000 PC, £329



Packard Bell 1314 PC, £379

Some Typical PC Computers

Model	Features*	Price Guide (+ VAT)	Supplier
Dell Dimension 3000	Intel Pentium 4 2.8 GHz processor, 512 MB RAM, 80 GB hard disk, 17" flat panel monitor, CD-RW drive.	£329	Dell
E Machines 4250	Intel Celeron 3.06 GHz processor, 512 MB RAM, 80 GB Hard disk, 17" flat panel monitor, DVD-RW drive.	£529	PC World
Packard Bell 1314	Intel Celeron 2.8 GHz processor, 256 MB RAM, 80 GB hard disk, 17" CRT monitor, DVD-RW drive.	£379	Dixons
Aries Performa 5500	Pentium 4 3.0 GHz processor, 512 MB RAM, 160 GB hard disk, no monitor, DVD-RW drive.	£417	Watford Electronics
Mesh Matrix Inspire Plus	AMD Athlon 64 3000+ processor, 512 MB RAM, 250 GB hard drive, 17" flat panel monitor, CD-RW/DVD-R drive.	£599	Dell
Compaq 1329	AMD Athlon 64 3400+ processor, 512 MB RAM, 160 GB hard drive, 17" flat panel monitor, DVD-RW drive.	£599	PC World
iQon Family PC	Intel Celeron 2.66 GHz processor, 256 MB RAM, 80 GB hard drive, 17" CRT monitor, CD-RW/DVD-R drive.	£425	Tesco

* See Technobabble section for explanation of terms.
Prices correct as of April 2005.

PC Computers - Advantages and Disadvantages

Relatively inexpensive – becoming cheaper all the time!	Can be complicated to use
Wide range of software	Can sometimes be difficult to install software
Wide range of options which can be tailored to individual needs	Some interfaces do not work as well as they should
Possible to get alternative keyboards, mice, etc..	Threat from computer viruses
Relatively easy to get "informal" support from friends, neighbours	

The Apple Macintosh

The Apple Macintosh first appeared in the early 1980s and has undergone various transformations over the years. There are currently four main families of Apple Mac computer: the Mac Mini, the eMac, the iMac G5 and the PowerMac G5. The Mac Mini and PowerMac computers do not include a monitor - the Mac Mini does not even come with a mouse or keyboard. The Mac Mini is the most recent Apple computer and is aimed at regular Apple users who wish to upgrade their computer at low cost and at PC users who might want to have a Mac as a second computer. The eMac and iMac computers are aimed at school, family and small business users, while the PowerMac models are directed more towards business use. Macintosh computers are generally easier to use than PCs and more reliable, particularly when new software is installed. They are, however, generally more expensive than comparable PCs, there is less software, and it can be more difficult to connect older special keyboards and mice for children with special needs. Many schools in Scotland use iMacs or eMacs.

The operating system (OS) can be an issue with Macs. Mac OS X, first introduced in 2001, currently ships with all new Apple Macs. Unfortunately, a number of programs designed for the previous, and very different, System 9 (also known as 'Classic') have not been upgraded recently and will not run under Mac OS X, except within the 'Classic' environment. The PowerMac G5 does not include the 'Classic Environment'.



Mac Mini

eMac

iMac G5

Power Mac G5

Apple Macintosh Computers		
Model	Features (in entry level machine)	Price Guide (+ VAT)
Mac Mini	1.25 GHz G4 Processor, 256 MB RAM, 40 GB Hard Disk, CD-RW / DVD-R, no keyboard, mouse, or monitor	£339 - £399 (depending on spec.)
eMac	1.25 GHz G4 Processor, 256 MB RAM, 40 GB Hard Disk, CD-RW / DVD-R, 17" CRT screen.	£549 - £679
iMac G5	1.6 GHz G5 Processor, 256 MB RAM, 80 GB Hard Disk, CD-RW / DVD-R, 17" / 20" screen.	£899 - £1,299
G5 PowerMac	1.8 GHz G5 Processor, 256 MB RAM, 80 GB Hard Disk, DVD-R Super-drive, no monitor.	£999 - £1,999

Apple Mac Computers - Advantages and Disadvantages	
More "stylish" than most PCs	Generally more expensive than a comparable PC
Relatively easy to use, compared to a PC	Narrower range of software available
Generally reliable – installation of new software unlikely to affect the computer	Does not come with a floppy disk drive – if you want to move small files to another computer using a floppy you may have to buy a separate disk drive.
Less likely to be affected by virus than a PC	Fewer alternative keyboards and mice available – though additional interface can be bought which allows use of PC keyboards / mice

Desktops / Towers and Laptops

Computers come in two main configurations: desktop/towers and laptops. It used to be that a desktop computer would consist of a fairly flat rectangular box, with the monitor usually sitting on top of the computer. Until recently most PCs were built as desktop computers, but there has been a general trend towards towers over the past few years. This coincides with a change in thinking with regard to the best place for the monitor to go for comfortable working. It used to be thought that the centre of the monitor should be at eye level – placing the monitor on a desktop computer brought it up to this level. Now, most people find it more comfortable to have the top of the screen at eye level, which is best done by having the monitor placed directly on top of the work surface. Towers are usually placed beside the monitor, or, if there isn't much space, on the floor.

Laptop computers are designed to be carried around. They are much lighter than desktops and towers, with the screen built into the lid, which will be closed while it is being carried around. Laptops are more expensive for an equivalent machine, though the price difference is not as great as it used to be. It is possible to get an entry level laptop, e.g. the Dell Inspiron 1150 for as little as £491. They are easily lost, damaged or stolen. Battery life is short, usually only a few hours, which means that it is most practical to use a laptop plugged into the mains electricity supply. Weight is certainly an issue - most laptops are too heavy for a child to comfortably carry around in a school. If a child needs to carry around a device for taking notes in school, we would usually recommend an Alphasmart, which is much lighter than a laptop and has a very long battery life. A laptop can, however be a useful option for a wheelchair user, who would find it difficult to use a computer on a desk, or for a person who genuinely needs to use a computer in different places. We would not generally recommend buying a laptop for a child who has special needs, unless it is the most practical option.

Technobabble - A Brief Guide to Terminology

Computer salesmen (yes, they tend to be men!) have a language of their own and tend to regard anybody who has not grasped the basics with total disdain. Unfortunately, in order to make a sensible purchase decision, you must have at least a basic understanding of some of the terms. Here's a short glossary of the terms that you will find useful.

CD-ROM – an optical disk used to store software and data, very similar to music CDs. If the computer has a CD-ROM drive, it will also be able to play music CDs. Most

software programs now come on a CD so all new computers have a CD-ROM drive, or equivalent. CD-ROM drives are rated by speed, e.g. X10 – in general, the higher the number, the better the CD-ROM drive.

CD-RW – a CD-RW drive can read information from a CD and write information to it.

People usually use the writing facility to back-up data on their machines, or if they wish to transfer files to another machine, e.g. pass a collection of digital photographs to a friend. People used to use floppy disks to exchange files, but they are now too small. There are two main types of blank CD - CD-R, which can be written to once and the more expensive CD-RW which can be wiped and used again.

DVD (Digital Video Disk) – this is a type of CD that can hold up to 8 times as much information as an ordinary CD. It is often used for video. A DVD drive will also be able to read CD-ROM disks.

For maximum flexibility of use, we would recommend getting a computer with CD-RW / DVD facility.

Graphics Card – this controls how signals are sent from the computer to the monitor. In general, the card that comes with the computer will be fine, but if you are going to want top performance for the latest fast-moving games, or for a lot of video editing work, you might want to upgrade. **We would not normally recommend upgrading - unless you are sure you need to.**

Hard Disk – this is where programs and information are stored in the computer when they are not being used. The size of a typical hard disk has increased dramatically over recent years, with space now being measured in GigaBytes (GB), rather than MegaBytes (MB). The more space the better! **We would suggest getting a hard disk with 80 GB.**

Memory – also known as RAM (Random Access Memory) this is the amount of room that the computer has for running programs. This is usually measured in MegaBytes (MB). Some programs need a lot of memory to run at all – others will run a lot more slowly if there is not enough memory. Getting extra memory is the easiest and cheapest way to upgrade a computer that is starting to seem “tired”. **We would recommend getting at least 256 MB, preferably 512 MB, of RAM in a new computer.**

Modem – This is essential if you want to connect your computer to the Internet via a phone line. Most new computers already have a Modem built-in – look for a “phone” socket to see if your computer has one. If there’s no modem, you can either buy one to fit inside your computer (cheaper, but fiddly to install), or an external one (more expensive, but easier to set up). Note that you will need a different type of modem depending on whether you will be connecting to the internet by dial-up or broadband (see Connecting to the Internet).

Monitor – the screen you look at. There are two basic types: the traditional CRT monitor, large, bulky and heavy, like a small television; and the LCD (flat) panel, slim and elegant, but a little more expensive. Computers are now generally sold with an LCD screen, but there is often an option to get a CRT monitor at a reduced overall price. There are three factors to consider in deciding between LCD and CRT screens: cost; available space (an LCD panel takes up much less room); and your child. If a child is particularly boisterous and likely to hit the screen, then the extra weight and stability of a CRT monitor may be an advantage. If your child has epilepsy, there is a small possibility of a fit being triggered by the use of a CRT monitor, especially if the monitor is old. There should be no intrinsic problem with an LCD panel, though individual

computer programs might contain flashing images, which could cause problems. Another important point to consider here is the size of the monitor – found by measuring a diagonal line between two corners of the screen. A bigger display area is usually an advantage, particularly if a child has a visual impairment, though size and weight can be factors to consider. **We would generally recommend a 17” (typical price £70 - £100 for a CRT, £130 - £200 for an LCD) or 19” monitor (£150 - £200 CRT, £250 - £300 LCD), but a 21” monitor (£350 - £400 CRT, £630 - £1,000 LCD) might be better, though much more expensive, for a child with low vision.** For some children, a touch monitor would make sense. This usually looks the same as a standard monitor, but has a special surface which allows a child to move the mouse pointer by touching the screen with their finger. A 17” CRT touch monitor costs £289, while a 15” LCD touch panel would cost £449.

Processor – this is the chip that lies at the heart of the computer and is the most important factor in measuring how powerful the computer is. PCs have different families of processor, e.g. Pentium, Celeron, Athlon. Each of these families has been developed over a period of time, e.g. the Pentium was superseded by the Pentium II, then by the Pentium III and now by the Pentium 4. The power of a processor is generally indicated by its speed, measured in MegaHertz (MHz) or GigaHertz (GHz) (1 GHz = 1,000 MHz), though this is not an infallible guide as there are other factors involved. As a general rule of thumb, though, the faster the processor, the better the computer. Apple computers currently have G4 or G5 processors, G5 being more recent, and more powerful.

Where to Buy

There are two main choices for buying a new computer – a local dealer, or a mail order (or internet-based) company. Some companies, e.g. Tiny run a hybrid service, with local showrooms where you can see their equipment, but with computers generally being delivered by courier from a central warehouse. Buying from a local dealer is better if you need help and advice and makes it easier to return the computer if something goes wrong. Local dealers might include big “chains”, such as PC World, Dixons and Comet, in addition to small independents. The “chains” are usually a little cheaper, though some independents, e.g. The Silicon Group in Edinburgh, can now provide excellent deals.

Approach purchasing by mail order / internet with caution. If you have a good knowledge about computers and know exactly what you want, then it is usually possible to make significant savings by buying through mail order / internet, but stick to the companies who have regular multi-page advertisements in computer magazines, e.g. Dabs, Dell, Mesh, Watford Electronics. These are well-established, reputable companies who generally provide a good service. Remember, even with the best companies, things can go wrong, and it is more difficult to sort if you bought equipment from the other end of the country, rather than a local shop.

Most of the mail order companies have web sites, where prices can be even cheaper than for mail order – they also frequently offer short-term special offers on the web. Web addresses can be found in their adverts in computer magazines.

Most mail order companies have little knowledge of special needs. A new company, Special Need, has recently been set up with the specific aim to provide affordable computer equipment and software for parents of children with special needs. Their address is: Special Need, 82 Oxhey Avenue, Oxhey, Watford WD19 4HA. Tel: 08700 535535, <http://www.specialneed.co.uk>.

NB If you are shopping around to find the “best deal”, be very careful to compare like with

like. Some headline prices might be for the computer only, without a monitor, or software, while other prices include everything. Be aware of offers of "free" software bundles. You may get a lot of programs that you want, or you might have your hard disk filled with lots of stuff that you don't want, or will never use.

Second Hand

It **may** be possible to get a good computer second hand – check local papers, cards in shops, etc.. In general, it is not a good idea to buy second-hand – computer technology changes so rapidly that anything over a year old would probably be out of date. If you see a second hand computer for sale, it is probably because the owner found it no longer met his / her needs and has bought a new computer.

If you live in the Edinburgh (EH postcode) area you may be able to get a second hand computer from Pass IT On (<http://www.passiton.sco.net>) for little or no cost. They are a charity which recycles computer equipment that is no longer required by local companies and individuals and passes it on to disabled people.

Funding

You would normally be expected to pay for a computer for your child yourself. If this is difficult and you can demonstrate a genuine need for the device, you may be able to get help from a charity. AbilityNet(<http://www.abilitynet.co.uk>) have produced an excellent Factsheet on Funding for an Adapted Computer, which provides advice on applying for funding and lists a number of charities that can be approached. It is worth investigating the many small local trusts that exist throughout the UK. These were often set up by a Victorian or some other benefactor to support 'needy people' born within a particular town, or with a particular surname, or with some other factor in common. If you fit into the category supported by such a Trust, then it can be very worthwhile making an approach. Details of charities and trusts in England and Wales (many of which apply to the whole of the UK) can be found on the Charity Commission web site (<http://www.charity-commission.gov.uk>). Scottish Trusts can be found on the SCVO web site (http://www.scvo.org.uk/essentials/directories/grant_making_trusts/).

Connecting Devices to your Computer

Once you've got your basic computer, you may want to connect other devices to it, e.g. a digital camera, a scanner, a printer, etc. Your child may need to use a special keyboard or mouse, or a special interface with switches to access the computer, all of which need to be connected to the computer. There are a number of different sockets through which devices can be connected to a computer:



Serial Port (also known as COM port). This is a fairly old way to connect a device to a computer and usually consists of a D-shaped socket with 9 pins, or in the case of some older computers, a round socket with 5 pins. Very few devices use the serial port now - the most likely devices to use one would be a touch screen or an older digital camera. **NEVER** plug a serial device into a computer, or remove it, when the power is on - you might damage the computer.



PS/2 Ports. These are round sockets with six pins and are usually used for connecting a standard keyboard and mouse. Again, **DO NOT** plug a PS/2 device into a computer when the power is on - you are less likely to cause damage than with a Serial device, but the keyboard / mouse usually won't work until the computer is re-started.



USB. This has become the new standard socket for connecting devices to computers. It is faster than the older connections and has the major advantage that you can plug in a device, or remove it, without restarting the computer. There are a number of varieties of USB connector. USB-A is a thin rectangular connection - USB slots on computers are always this type. Devices that you are connecting to a computer, e.g. a digital camera, will often have a smaller D-shaped USB-B connector. You may also hear about USB 1.1 and USB 2 devices. These use connections that look the same, but if you connect a USB-2 device to a USB-2 socket it will transfer data up to 40 times faster than if one or both uses the older USB-1.1. You won't notice this speed difference with a keyboard or mouse, but it is certainly noticeable if you are transferring digital images or music files to a computer.



Firewire. This looks similar to USB, but one end of the rectangle is curved. It provides a very fast connection, with a similar speed to that of USB-2 for data transfer. Firewire is usually used when working with video. Not all computers will have a Firewire connection as standard - you may have to ask for it specially if you think you will need it.

Historically, sockets have usually been put on the back of the computer, which is a nuisance if you are regularly changing the devices connected to a computer. A number of manufacturers, e.g. Compaq and Mesh, now have USB sockets on the front of their computers.

Accessing the Internet

The internet provides a vast range of resources for everybody - including disabled children. To connect a computer to the internet you will usually need a modem, a phone line and to register with an Internet Service Provider. Most people connect to the internet from home by using either a dial-up or a broadband connection. Dial-up is slow and means that the any phone connected to the same socket as the computer cannot be used while you are using the internet. Broadband is around ten times faster, can be left connected without interfering with your phone, but is a little more expensive. Broadband is only available over a standard phone line in the UK where the local telephone exchange has been upgraded for it. You can check to see if it is available where you stay be going to the BT Broadband web site, <http://www.bt.com/broadband> and entering your postcode. You can register to use BT as your Internet Service Provider (ISP), but the BT Broadband site also has a very useful register of the UK providers, where you can compare the various deals available.

There can be dangers in using the internet with regard to finding inappropriate material and un-supervised use of chat rooms. The Scottish Executive have produced material advising on safe use of the internet. You can get it from <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/clickthinking>. Further advice is available from the Parents' Centre web site, <http://www.parentscentre.gov.uk/usingtheinternet/>.

You should also be aware of the dangers posed by viruses and other destructive software transmitted over the internet. It is vital to install software to detect and remove viruses and to create a 'firewall' to make it more difficult for other people to access your computer over the internet. Windows XP includes anti-virus and Firewall software, but products from third parties can offer greater protection. AVG from <http://www.grisoft.com> is an excellent free anti-virus program, which can be updated regularly (at least once a week) over the internet. It is possible for people to 'hack' into an unprotected computer over the internet, stealing data, or using the computer for unauthorised practices, e.g. transmitting viruses!

A good firewall program, e.g. ZoneAlarm (a free version is available from <http://www.zonealarm.com>) will make it much more difficult for people to access your computer. A third threat to your computer comes in the form of 'spyware', which secretly installs itself on your computer, collects information and passes it back to its creator. If your computer starts to run expectedly slowly, or you start getting lots of unwelcome pop-ups on the internet, then this may be caused by spyware. Spybot Search and Destroy from <http://www.safer-networking.org>. is a good program to clear spyware from your computer.

Apple computers are much less prone to attack from viruses, etc. than PCs, though they are certainly not immune. The people who create viruses usually target PCs because there are far more of them around and because of hostility towards Microsoft, who created the Windows operating system.

There is more information about the internet and a list of resources suitable for disabled children in an Information Sheet, Exploring Internet Resources for Pupils with Additional Support Needs, available from the CALL Centre web site, <http://www.callcentrescotland.org.uk>.

Special Access

A child with a physical disability, a visual impairment, or learning difficulty may not be able to access the computer using the standard keyboard and mouse. Sometimes adjustments can be made to the Accessibility Options, of the computer, e.g. making the mouse pointer bigger, changing the sensitivity of the mouse and keyboard, changing the size and colour of the display. A Quick Guide to Adjusting Windows Control Panel Options is available from the CALL Centre web site. Abilitynet also have number of useful FactSheets and SkillSheets offering information on adjusting Windows options available free from their web site, <http://www.abilitynet.co.uk>.

On other occasions it is necessary to get special software, or a different keyboard, or a trackball, or, touchscreen, to use instead of the mouse. Mainstream suppliers such as PC World and Dixons usually have a range of alternative keyboards and mice, but it may be necessary to go to one of the more specialist suppliers such as Inclusive Technology or Keytools.



Inclusive Technology, Gatehead Business Park, Delph, Oldham OL3 5BX. Tel. 01457 819799, <http://www.inclusive.co.uk>

Keytools, PO Box 700, Southampton SO17 1LQ. Tel. 023 80584314. <http://www.keytools.co.uk>.

If a child has severe and complex disabilities, it is possible they may have to rely on switch access to operate a computer. This involves connecting a switch to the computer by means of a special switch interface and finding the easiest way for the child to reliably operate the switch. This can be complicated to set up and will be difficult and slow for the child to use. There is information about switch access and other forms of special access technology available on the CALL Centre web site.



If your child is using a special keyboard or mouse, or some other system, at school, then it would make sense to use a similar setup at home. If you are in any doubt about the most appropriate system to use, you should seek professional advice. There are a number of centres in Scotland where advice on access technology for children with special needs is available – contact the CALL Centre for details.

Software

Some children will be able to cope well with “mainstream” software, available from companies such as PC World, Virgin, HMV and Electronics Boutique. Other companies such as AVP, Tag and REM provide comprehensive catalogues for mail order. If “mainstream” software is too difficult to use, there’s a wide range of software available now for children with additional support needs. Get catalogues from companies such as Inclusive Technology, Don Johnston Special Needs, SEMERC and Widgit.

AVP, School Hill Centre, Chepstow, Monmouthshire NP16 5PH. Tel. 01291 625439, <http://www.avp.co.uk>.

TAG Learning Ltd., 25 Pelham Road, Gravesend, Kent DA11 0HU, Tel. 0800 591262, <http://www.taglearning.com>.

REM, Great Western House, Langport, Somerset, TA10 9DN. Tel. 01458 254700, <http://www.r-e-m.co.uk>

Inclusive Technology, Inclusive Technology Ltd., Gatehead Business Park, Delph, Oldham OL3 5BX. Tel. 01457 819799, <http://www.inclusive.co.uk>

Don Johnston Special Needs, 18 Clarendon Court, Calver Road, Winwick Quay, Warrington WA2 8QP. Tel. 01925 241642. <http://www.donjohnston.co.uk>.

SEMERC, Granada Learning, Granada Television, Quay Street, Manchester M60 9EA. Tel 0161 827 2927. <http://www.semerc.co.uk>.

Widgit, 26 Queen Street, Cubbington, Leamington Spa CV32 7NA. Tel. 01926 885 303. <http://www.widgit.co.uk>

Though software can be expensive, there are many opportunities to get “free” or cheap software. Many computer magazines come with CDs, containing demonstration versions of programs, or even full copies of a program. It is often possible to download demonstration copies of new programs from the manufacturers web site. These programs might only work for a limited time, or may be restricted in some way, but will give a good idea of whether the full program will be useful.

Some internet sites collect and review “free” software. A particularly good one is *Kids Domain* (<http://kidsdomain.com>).

Getting More Information

More and more people now have a computer at home, or use one at work. If you are new to computers and are about to buy one, the chances are you will know someone who can advise you.

Computer magazines are a valuable source of information – new products are reviewed and most magazines will regularly have comparison features where they will compare different computers in a particular price range. The advertisements are particularly useful if you are buying equipment. Here are a few of the magazines you are most likely to see:

PC World – This is the most authoritative UK magazine, though it does get very technical.

Don’t worry if you don’t understand half of the information in it – very few people do! The comparative reviews are excellent.

PC Interactive – This is much more “user friendly”, aimed more at people new to computing.

PC Zone – This is aimed much more at the “games” market.

Computer Shopper – Lots of advertisements and comparative reviews.

Mac User – Monthly magazine with an emphasis on news and reviews relating to the Apple Macintosh.

Mac World – Another Mac related magazine – Buyers Guide in each issue contains a useful summary of current equipment and software.

The Internet is a valuable source of information about computers and software. Most Internet Service Providers will have links from the front pages of their web sites. Examples of these include: <http://www.msn.co.uk/computing> and <http://www.tiscali.co.uk/technology>. *ZDNet UK* (<http://www.zdnet.co.uk/>) provides regularly updated news of the world of computing.