



## AT THE LIBRARY

By Julie Winkelstein  
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***“Books are the most constant of friends; they are the most accessible and wisest of counselors, and the most patient of teachers.”***

-Charles W. Eliot,  
American educator, 1834-  
1926, from *The Happy  
Life*, 1896

I’ve been spending more time in the children’s section at the Albany Library lately and I’ve been having a good time. Part of my pleasure has been because I find it satisfying to be around young children and books. I like to watch the excitement of finding the right book; I like to see parents and children reading together. I even like the picture books scattered throughout the area: on the couch, on the tables, sometimes even on the floor. I think these books are one of the attractions of a children’s area, with their brightly colored covers, their numerous illustrations and their large, clear print.

Parents and children come to this area for many reasons, however. Sometimes they are looking for an easy-to-read book; sometimes they are looking for a biography of a famous person or a book about missions. Sometimes they come for videos or DVD’s or to look through the children’s software

collection.

And, frequently, the children come to use the computers. On weekday afternoons, the children’s computers – like the ones in the adult area – are in constant use. And unlike the ones in the adult area, they are being used for games.

From the distance of the adult reference desk, I have been sorry to see this happening. I like to think a library is about books, despite all the evidence that it is much more. And so when I have walked by and seen clusters of young children laughing and collaborating in front of a computer screen, I have wondered about having these machines.

But recently I have watched children working together, helping each other, beginning friendships and, occasionally, coming into conflict – all in front of a computer screen. It has been good for me to see this kind of camaraderie,

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because it is easy to assume that a computer game is a poor replacement for a book, and has no value in a child's life.

Since I knew there must be some information on children and computer games - this issue is as controversial as children and television or children and junk food - I did some research and found two particularly interesting articles. The first one is a piece from Ultralab ([www.utralab.anglis.ac.uk](http://www.utralab.anglis.ac.uk)) about the benefits of computer games. According to the article, children playing some computer games are "engaged in a sophisticated cycle: Observe, Question, Hypothesize, Test..." The authors contend that parents and teachers are unable to appreciate what is happening, because they are not literate in computer games, just the way non-readers are not literate with books.

It's an interesting argu-

ment and I can see how it could be true. On the other hand, there are concerns about the violence of many games - do they make the children more inclined to be violent?

Emily Sohn ([www.scienceforkids.org](http://www.scienceforkids.org)) has written a two-part article called "Video Games - Good or Bad?" The first part, "The Violent Side of Video Games," quotes research that shows violent computer games increase heart rate and blood pressure. She also mentions something called the "mean world syndrome," where prolonged exposure to violence can make you think the world is a bad place.

The second part, "What Video Games Can Teach Us," talks about the enhanced reading skills and broadened interests of some computer and video game players.

After reading these articles, I'm still not sure how I feel about computer games. But

I do know that watching children play them has made me question my assumptions - and that's always a good thing.