

Alliance for Childhood
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Association

The Alliance has been very busy this spring working on its computer project. More and more we are reminded of the Emperor and his new clothes which existed only in the minds of the faithful. The adulation being offered to computers in schools makes one feel that reason and common sense have flown out the window. There are growing reports of children suffering eye strain, musculo-skeletal problems, and carpal tunnel syndrome from excessive use of the computer over time. There are also mounting indications that using computers is making it harder for children to develop their social and emotional capacities, and in elementary school and younger there is little evidence of academic gains through the use of the computer. At the same time the enormous cost of hardware, software, and retraining of teachers is cutting into music and arts programs, libraries, and many other services needed by the children.

A parent of a two year old was telling us recently that she has been wrestling with the question of how much computer time her child should have. Since she and her husband work on the computer a great deal, it seemed only right to her that the child also should have time in front of the screen. Indeed, when her grandfather comes over, they spend their time together working a program about Grandpa and child. That was surely all right, wasn't it? I commented that one problem was the child would always have her back to her grandfather instead of facing him or walking by his side. She suddenly looked as if blinders had fallen off, and she said, "Oh yes, when I was growing up my favorite time with my father was when we went for walks in nature. They were wonderful." We are like a nation in a trance. The moment has come to wake people up, particularly as the computer epidemic is spreading to more and more countries.

A *Business Week* reporter recently explained to me that the current thinking is that since computers have done such wonderful things for the business world they will surely be just as wonderful in education. The problem is that children are not adults and education is not business, but these lines are becoming more and more blurred. In the case of the Emperor and his new clothes it just took one clear eyed child to break the spell. We'll have to see what it takes in this case.

The Alliance is working on a two pronged computer project. One part of the project has focused on the work of Alison Armstrong, co-author of *The Child and the Machine*, a book describing the impact of computers on the lives of children. The Alliance first helped plan two very stimulating workshops with Alison which were organized by the Waldorf Schools in Chapel Hill and Baltimore. Three more workshops with her took place in New York and California in late April and May, as well as several individual talks. A number of key figures also took part in these workshops, including Jane Healy at a conference sponsored by Douglas Sloan's Center for the Spiritual Foundations of Education at Teachers College. In Marin County, the Bay Area Alliance group has organized a dynamic conference featuring Alison, Frank Wilson, who wrote *The Hand*, and Stuart Brown, M.D. of the Play Institute who is preparing PBS specials on the importance of play to be aired this summer or fall. The final conference is organized by Joan Jaeckel of Whole Alliance in Los Angeles, an organization committed to healthy change throughout education.

Alison and her co-author Charles Casement have completely revised their book for its U.S. edition. It covers the latest research and shares many glimpses into U.S. schools. *The Child and*

the Machine is an excellent book for teachers who are asked why we don't include computers in our kindergartens and grade schools, as well as for parents, grandparents, and others who want to better understand the impact of computers on the lives of children. School bookstores can order the book from Robins Lane Press, P.O. Box 207, Beltsville, MD 20704, and individual copies are available through the internet from www.bobnancy.com — and yes, there is a certain irony here.

As the second part of the computer project, under the coordination of Colleen Cordes, a Waldorf parent and freelance writer, a booklet is being prepared with input from a number of experts in the field. Also a position statement is being prepared which will be widely distributed over the signatures of a number of key figures. It is hoped that by early fall all of this will be ready to be released.

We are already looking ahead to next year when we hope to continue the computer project and build up a project on the importance of play. We are very grateful to have been given some gift money for the basic administration of the Alliance, and we are now raising money for the projects.

Now full focus is also being directed towards the International Alliance Conference in Brussels on October 11–14, 2000. There will be excellent speakers and round tables, evening arts performances, a festive atmosphere, and time to converse with concerned individuals from around the world. The full program will be available soon.

For more information about the Alliance, please visit our website at www.allianceforchildhood.net. We may also be reached at P.O. Box 444, College Park MD 20741.