

# Computer Lessons for Kids Taught by Kermit the Frog

By Simson L. Garfinkel

WHEN most kids sit down at a computer for the first time, they seem to instinctively realize two essential facts: First, that desktop computers were designed, built and sold expressly for the purpose of playing games; and second, that every child in the world should be given one for his or her own personal amusement.

Now two new books, out in time for the holidays, feature Kermit the Frog teaching young children something else: how computers work, and how to use the machines to express themselves. That's good news, since the inner workings of the typical desktop computer are a mystery for many people, children and adults alike.

An unfortunate result of the semiconductor revolution is that even an inquisitive six year old with a screwdriver won't get many answers from prying off the cover and peering inside. Actually seeing and understanding how a computer is put together requires far more delicate tools and a good guide. That's where the Muppets come in.

In "Kermit Learns How Computers Work," Jim Henson's green talking frog takes kids (and their parents) on a tour of a typical desktop computer. Kermit teaches children the names for the different parts of computers and shows what they are used for.

Although computers are great for playing games, Kermit shows kids that they're also handy for writing plays, painting pictures of friends, and playing songs. He also explains how a single computer can accomplish so many different tasks by having different programs loaded into it.

Next, Kermit opens up the cover of a typical system and takes kids on a tour of the computer's insides. Shrinking real small, he shows that computers are really tiny cities, with data moving around and around in wires, being directed by the central processing unit and stored in files called memory. Despite the seemingly simplistic explanations, the book's author, Margy Kuntz, takes pains to be technically accurate: not even a professor of computer science at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology could find fault with what Kermit says.

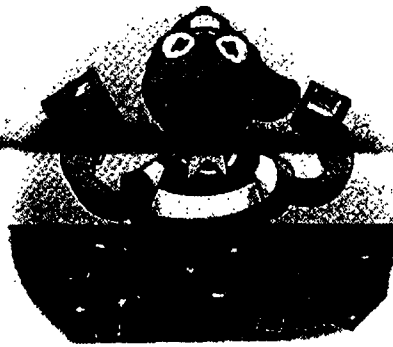
"Kermit Learns Windows" is less useful. Instead of teaching fundamental concepts that apply equally well to any computer on the market, this book's aim is to teach a specific skill for a single company's product. Kermit doesn't learn how to use a Macintosh, the computer system with unquestionably the highest-quality educational software, or how to hack an Apple II, one of the most popular computers in grade schools today.

No, Kermit learns Microsoft Windows — and he doesn't do a particularly good job at that.

While "Kermit Learns Windows" teaches the basics of making windows open and close, the book falls down when it tries to explain how to use Microsoft's Program Manager or the intricacies of Microsoft's Paintbrush program. The problem is that these programs are hard to use. Many adults find Windows a challenge to master.

Sitting down at the keyboard, a typical five- or six-year-old could become hopelessly lost inside the Microsoft maze. And unlike an educational-software package that parents might buy, a traditional book, with Kermit frozen still on the printed page, simply can't figure out that something is wrong and give the child helpful advice or encouraging comments.

One of the more amazing parts of "Kermit Learns Windows" is a note in the back to parents stating: "It is extremely



## KERMIT LEARNS HOW COMPUTERS WORK

By Margy Kuntz  
Illustrations by Tom Brannon  
Prima, 49 pp., \$9.95  
Ages 5 and up

## KERMIT LEARNS WINDOWS

By Kathleen Resnick  
Illustrations by Matthew Fox  
Prima, 49 pp., \$9.95  
Ages 5 and up

unlikely that your child could do anything to harm the computer while using Windows software."

Would that were true: Simply pressing two keys is enough to make Windows delete files, erase program groups, or destroy your work. While Kathleen Resnick, the book's author, does recommend that parents have backup copies of any important work, her reassuring tone could be misleading to less computer-literate adults.

While it's probably all right to let a frog teach kids about computers, until there is a version of Windows especially for children, parents would be well advised to leave instruction about Windows to a human.

■ Simson L. Garfinkel is a freelance writer who specializes in science and technology.

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