Keyboarding and Touch Typing for Children

The earlier a child learns to type, the easier they will find it, this factsheet gives some useful tips on where to start.

This factsheet is part of AbilityNet's free Advice and Information service.

If you have any questions at all about anything in this Factsheet, or any other aspect of assistive technology, please contact us.

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Learning to use the keyboard effectively is an important skill for any child. Computers are becoming ever more prevalent at school and home and they can make a huge difference in producing work quickly and legibly. For many children, sometime invested in developing keyboarding skills can have an enormous impact in their ability to make best use of a computer.

Becoming more familiar with the keyboard or learning to touch type (being able to type with multiple fingers without looking at the keyboard) can be very helpful for children with a range of disabilities.

 For children with visual impairments, this skill can help with their orientation on a keyboard and you can find a separate factsheet, "Vision Impairment and Touch Typing" that provides further information in this area.

Children with Specific Learning Difficulties can benefit from learning to type through the physical aspect of learning letter patterns. While children with more profound motor difficulties may find traditional touch typing access to the keyboard difficult, this does not necessarily preclude them from developing their own method of typing that is faster and more presentable than handwriting.

Some children with Developmental Co-ordination disorder (DCD), or dyspraxia have also shown encouraging results when given time and encouragement to develop more effective keyboarding skills.

Why Learn to Type

For many children and adults with disabilities, handwriting can be very difficult for all sorts of reasons. A range of handwriting schemes and interventions are available to support children who are having difficulty with handwriting. Further information in this area may be available from local schools or LEA specialist teaching services and Paediatric Occupational Therapists. The National Handwriting Association also has a range of useful information, publications and courses in this area. While for all children learning to type more effectively is important, for children who are already having handwriting or recording difficulties this is especially so.

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The keyboard has many important advantages;

- It increases legibility and clarity of presentation
- Increased speed of input
- Spelling- learning physical letter patterns on the keyboard can be helpful with the spelling of some words
- Reduces the physical pressure and concentration of handwriting- pressing a key can be much easier than manipulating a pen or pencil
- Editing work is easier
- Confidence. The keyboard may allow the child to record work more independently and to produce the required work in the time allowed.
- A reduced demand on visual perception skills. Some individuals with poor visual perception find it difficult to move their focus from screen to keyboard (and perhaps to a classroom whiteboard). By learning to touch type, the individual reduces the demand they make on their visual perception skills by not having to look at the keyboard

However, before a word processing device can be used usefully in the classroom, the child needs to have had devoted time to developing the skill of keyboarding, in the same way that we all spend time developing handwriting skills. As a rule of thumb, it is a good idea to have a typing speed that is equal to, or surpasses handwriting speed before a keyboard is used as a regular recording aid in the classroom.

When is the right time to learn?

Obviously, this can vary from individual to individual and there is no absolute answer to this question. Literacy levels can affect the ability of someone to be able to type. Other factors to do with physical motor skills and a spatial awareness of the body also affect this. As a rule of thumb, a child needs to have a spelling age of around a seven year old and up to progress well with learning to touch type (by which we mean not having to look at the keyboard). However, children with literacy difficulties may then find that learning to type, particularly with a system that uses real words may be beneficial to spelling.

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What to look for

Proper posture and keystroking techniques are important both for skill development and for the prevention of physical problems. Whilst our expertise lies with adaptive hardware and software, some advice about ergonomic furniture can be found in our "Ergonomic Workstations" factsheet.

If you are intending to use a software based typing tutorial package, most will have a section which will teach the importance of good technique, posture and the duration of use. Taking regular breaks away from the computer is important, and during a sustained period of typing "micro-breaks" involving the loosening and "shaking out" of hands arms and shoulders can be helpful every few minutes.

Keyboards

An alternative to the standard computer keyboard which has 102-105 keys, can be helpful for some children. Younger children may find a smaller keyboard easier to use, where the keys themselves are smaller, so requiring less stretching. Some keyboards also feature an "a-shape", such as the MyKids keyboard, which allows the hands to adopt a more natural position

Some children also find it easier to use a compact keyboard when first beginning to use the keyboard. This has the same size keys, but there are fewer of them so making familiarity easier to attain.

Product	Supplier
MyKids keyboard and mini mouse	Grape County (www.grapecounty.co.uk)
Small or Compact keyboards	Maxess Products, Inclusive Technology, Keytools

There are a wide range of alternative keyboards available. Information about single handed keyboard use can be found in our "Keyboard- single handed use" factsheet.

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Different letter cases and higher contrast keytops can also be helpful. A number of lower case keyboards can be bought, though Kidgloves and large print keyboard stickers are also helpful here. Kidgloves provide a durable membrane which do not interfere with the process of typing and are available in high contrast and lowercase styles.

Product	Supplier
Kid glove and keyboard	Keytools, Inclusive Technology
Keyboard Stickers	Keytools, Inclusive Technology

Software

A good typing program will allow the child to develop their skills with the keyboard quickly without losing motivation to use the computer. A number of important factors make a good piece of touch typing software. However, the first consideration is the needs of the individual. Are they likely to need a highly motivating, engaging software title that feels more like a game, or would they respond well to a structured approach that put a greater emphasis on key skills and good keyboarding habits? How old is the user and where are they likely to be using the software? The best software should include the following features:

- Ergonomic and safe keyboarding guide or section
- Provide a multi-sensory approach, where both sound and images are used to re-enforce instructions and allow repetition of instructions if possible
- A large, clear on-screen keyboard which shows the position of both keys and your fingers is very helpful
- Does the software use real words? The use of real words rather than nonsense letter patterns as soon as possible within practice exercises can be very helpful .
- Can the programme preferences be changes to take account of the user? Being able to change font size and style, background and text colour, the use of sound, speed and accuracy targets to be achieved are all very helpful
- That it does not try to teach too much too quickly. The focus should initially be on accuracy and not speed and should allow the user to practice for short periods of

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time, rather than relying on longer sessions to allow progress. The emphasis with children should be short but regular practice.

- Can progress be tracked and recorded?

The programs themselves…

There are many touch typing programs now available aimed at the student market. There are of course some well tried and tested methods of typing tuition which do not involve a computer.

Some professionals have advocated methods of keyboarding for its therapeutic value for children with disabilities. Dorothy Penso outlines her "vertical keyboarding method" in her book.

Product	Supplier
Dorothy Penso: Keyboarding skills for children with disabilities (1999)	http://eu.wiley.com/WileyCDA/WileyTitle/productCd-1861561016.html

Below we have identified a number of current titles being recommended for children with a range of disabilities.

Keyboard Familiarity programs

Some children are identified early as likely to need a keyboard based approach to recording. Others may be unlikely to acquire these skills. In all cases being able to move around the keyboard more quickly is beneficial. Some software will introduce the concept of "letter" finding in a fun way. Others may combine this skill with spelling activities.

Product	Supplier
First Keys to Literacy 3	Widgit Software

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Touch typing programs

A number of programs are available commercially to run on a PC (and Apple Macintosh). We have not reviewed them here in detail, but have tried to provide an indication of the type of need they may address. Further information and description of typing tutors for dyslexic children is available from IanSyst Ltd, or from the suppliers.
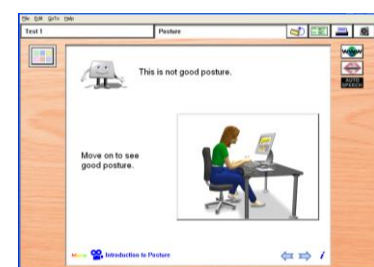
Product	Supplier
English type Junior/Senior	http://www.englishtype.com/

Designed for use with dyslexic and dyspraxic children, this program has a clear and uncluttered display and structure. It is Linked to the English National Curriculum, and options allow you to choose a level (Key stage 1, 2 or 3) It uses real words as soon as possible and has a mix of exercises, practice and games. There is good sound support with a real UK English voice. Teacher/parent options allow users to be monitored, for goal accuracy targets to be adjusted and for new lessons to be accessed where a student needs to be moved on. A demonstration version is available from www.englishtype.com .

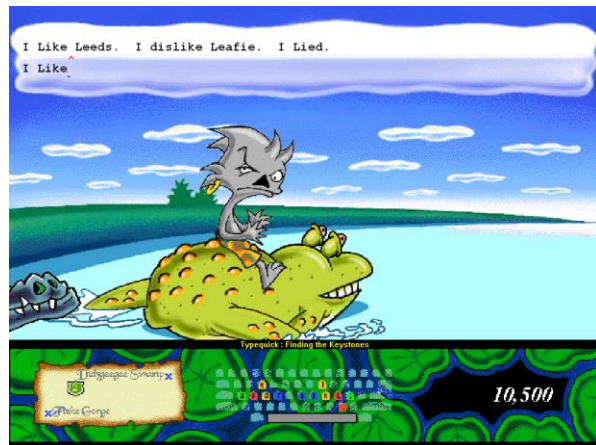| Product	Supplier
UltraKey V5	Barry Bennett

This program has more flexibility than most, allowing you to skip certain sections and return to them later. It allows you to customise text size, and the display settings and includes a very clear pictorial representation of the keyboard and hand position. It has good screen speech support and good sections on posture and the home keys that include the use of video. Each lesson includes practice using real word and sentences. Ultrakeys has classroom management tools and it can be installed on a network with the correct

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license, though a reduced cost for the home user is also available. Ultrakey is also available as a palm application for the AlphaSmart Dana..

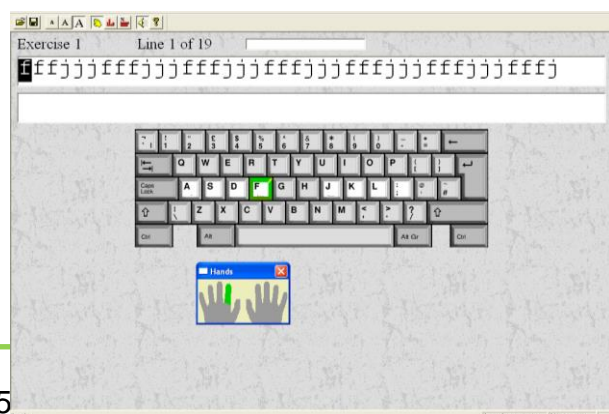| Product	Supplier
TypeQuick	http://www.typequick.co.uk/products/typequick-for-students

This program comes from Australia and follows the adventures of a koala bear. The graphics and adventure-story element of the program make it appealing for many children, though each lesson takes between 20-30 minutes which for some is too long. Each lesson must be completed in order to record progress There are 10 lessons in total. Many children will find this great fun and very motivating. However, the onscreen display of the keyboard and hands is not the best during the exercises and for some, the encouragement to go faster (as opposed to promoting accuracy) may prove to be a deflating distraction.

Product	Supplier
Iota Touch Type	http://www.iota.co.uk/touchtype/

Touch type provides a clear, uncluttered screen. Options allow the text size and style to be changed and the program also speaks the next letter to be typed. The program itself provides a sequence of simple exercises; there is no "fun" element to this software title. It keeps a record of speed and accuracy which can be printed
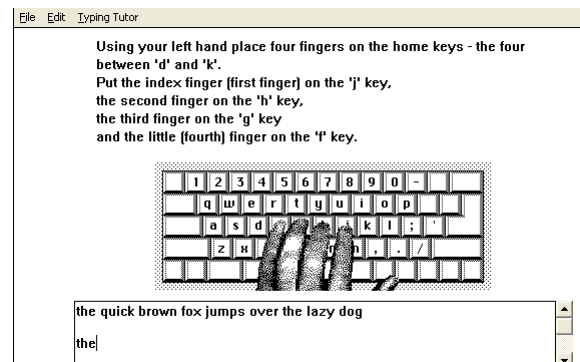
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off. The program also saves the user's position, though it is possible to skip between lessons freely.

Product	Supplier
Five fingered typist	http://www.typeonehand.com/

Children who need to use one hand to type may find the "Five fingered Typist" program helpful. This program redefines the home keys (fghj) and takes the user through a series of lessons for either right or left handed use. This program has no sound, but features an onscreen keyboard and hand representation. Unfortunately, this program does not display in full screen. The program has little guidance on posture, but does provide some useful tips on positioning specifically for a one handed keyboard user. Further information about keyboarding with one hand can be found in our "Keyboard- single handed use" factsheet.

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Touch Typing Tutor for Apple Computers

There are a number of touch typing software packages available for the Mac. These include:

- **Mavis Beacon (http://download.cnet.com/Mavis-Beacon-Teaches-Typing-2011/3000-2051_4-10967560.html?tag=contentBody;pop)**

- **Key Blaze (http://www.nchsoftware.com/typingtutor/index.html) also available for Windows computers**

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Free resources

There are a number of freeware or shareware programs that can be downloaded from the Internet. A very full list of further resources and information can be found at http://typingsoft.com for Windows computers and http://en.softonic.com/s/free-typing-lessons:mac for Mac.

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We are always keen to help share knowledge about accessibility and assistive technology. If you have any questions about how you may use the contents of this Factsheet please contact us at AbilityNet and we will do all we can to help.

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