INTRODUCTION

You may have noticed that the computers in your classroom don’t look as sharp or new as they did some months ago. You may even have sat down in front of one and noticed you couldn’t see through the monitor because of all the smudges. Welcome to the world of computing with young children. It is a phenomenon very similar to the mysterious way that walls and furniture in our homes get dirty. When I was growing up, these offensive things were blamed on Mr. Nobody. Well, I have a revelation for you: It was all done by children. Yet my parents still found it within their capacity to love me, and we love the children in our classrooms, so we don’t get upset about dirt on computers: We clean it off. Below are some cost-saving cleaning tips. You might enlist the children’s help, as in a cartoon I saw recently where the teacher was saying something like this: “Now, Suzy, you pick up the blocks; Jeff, you straighten up the books while Jason backs up the hard disk drive.”

STICKY FINGERS

Young children’s fingers have an affinity for dirt. Dirt on fingers ends up on the keyboard and all over the screen, the mouse, the mouse pad, and all over the case. Whether they are touching the graphics that are being counted, trailing a character across the screen, or following along as words are highlighted while the computer reads a story, children love to touch the monitor as they interact with software. Monitors need cleaning on nearly a daily basis. You can go to your local computer store and spend about $10 or more for a small bottle of CRT (cathode ray tube) cleaner, or you can go to the grocery store and, for a couple of dollars, buy a big bottle of window cleaner. The foamy kind works best because you have more control over where it goes. Apply it with a soft, lint-free rag, never paper towels, because they will scratch your monitor screen! Of course, computers should never be cleaned without first being unplugged from the electrical outlet.

Also be very careful with any chemically coated glare filters that remove UV rays from the monitor’s emissions. These framed pieces of glass that attach in a variety of ways to your monitor screen have been coated with special chemicals that any commercial-grade window cleaner will dissolve. Only use the special bottle of cleaner that came with glare filter, and when that runs out, resort to a damp, lint-free cloth. The best lint-free cloth I can recommend is a baby diaper (not disposable—the real thing).

One simple way to deal with the sticky finger problem is to establish a set of classroom computer rules. In addition to the typical rules about sharing and helping, remind children to wash their hands and dry them well before going to the computers. Most children will remember after just a few reminders.

KEYBOARD

Remember to unplug everything. Cleaning the keyboard and the rest of the machine is not much of a bother. For this job, I recommend two options: prewetted paper towels or spray-on cleaners. Among the multiple cleaning products that have come and gone were Spiffits®. There were Spiffits® for any kind of cleaning job. They consisted of a prewetted paper cleaning towel (like a baby wipe but more heavy-duty and not as wet). If your grocery store is large enough, you may be able to find some type of these (Windex® made them as well). Get the ones for light cleaning as they are just tough enough for those fingerprint smudges. Caution: Whatever you do, don’t use them on the monitor screen or the glare filter. They will scratch the monitor badly and dissolve the chemicals on the glare filter.

If you can’t find the prewetted cleaning towels, then any brand of mild spray-on cleaner will do. Spray it on a rag first, and then rub it over the keyboard and other parts of the machine (except the monitor screen and...
glare filter). Try not to get your rag too wet. Water that runs down into the keyboard or other parts of the computer can cause an electrical short that may be very expensive to repair. Note, however, that whatever brand of spray cleaner makes the least suds is the better choice. Suds are just a bother, not a danger. For cleaning the hard-to-get-to places on the keyboard, try a Q-Tip™. Wet it with your spray cleaner or rubbing alcohol, and it will clean any hard-to-reach place. Radio Shack™ sells them with extra-long sticks to clean remote places on the keyboard.

That said, however, it is remarkable how durable computers are. The author runs summer computer camps for young children. One summer night, many years ago, the restroom above the preschool sprung a leak. The water ran through the ceiling and completely filled an Apple IIe with water. I dumped it out, dried all the electrical circuits with a hair dryer, and waited a day to be sure, and that machine is still working today (some eight years later).

With these simple and inexpensive cleaning supplies, you can make your computer look brand new. There is something about bright, shiny, clean computers that makes administrators think they spent the money well and that you appreciate the hardware. Children are more attracted to the machines as well.

**MICE AND MOUSE PADS**

The last problem area is cleaning the mouse. Have you ever noticed that, after a while, the cursor on the screen starts moving erratically? It jerks across the screen, or you have to push the mouse across the mouse pad 100 times to get it to move an inch. There are really two problems here. One is that mice have evolved since the Apple II computer. The insides of the mouse are essentially the same: a round ball and two or three plastic rollers. But old mice had no Teflon™ glides on the bottom and were meant to be used with the cloth-covered mouse pads. Since the introduction of the Apple II GS, mice have had Teflon™ glides on the bottom, which means they are meant to be used with the plastic-topped mouse pads. So here are your two cleaning problems: mice get dirty inside, and mouse pads get dirty outside.

As the child moves his or her hands around navigating the mouse, body oils and other mysterious sticky stuff are transferred to the mouse pad. You can’t see it, but it builds up and causes the mouse to stick or slide erratically, which affects the cursor on the screen—very frustrating to children and adults alike. Both types of mouse pads can be cleaned with any mild, spray-on cleaner and a soft, lint-free rag. I have found that Resolve™ (a carpet cleaner) works best on the cloth-covered mouse pads. This cleaning should be done once a week to keep things running smoothly.

For mice, there are nifty mouse cleaners that can be purchased at your local computer store for $10 or more. You can get the same cleaners from a mail-order catalog called MEI/Micro Center (800-634-3478) for under $3. You will also need tweezers, Q-tips™, or cotton swabs, rubbing alcohol, mild soap, and a blast of air. If you turn the mouse over, you will find a round, thumbnail door. Try to turn it with your thumbnail: it will go in only one direction. When it opens, the hard rubber ball will fall out. Set the ball and the door aside, and visually inspect the inside cavity of the mouse. Are the white or black plastic rollers covered with some brown goop? Are there hairs and fuzz wrapped around the axles of the plastic rollers? Is there evidence of fuzz in other places? All that goop, hair, and fuzz was picked up by the mouse’s hard rubber ball as it moved around on the mouse pad (which was touched by sticky fingers.)

First, take your tweezers and pull all the hairs and fuzz off the axles on which the plastic rollers turn. Next, take a cotton swab, dip it in rubbing alcohol, and clean the brown goop off the plastic rollers. Set that part of the mouse aside to let the alcohol evaporate. Take the hard rubber ball to a sink and lightly scrub it with your fingers and a mild hand or dish soap (you don’t need much). Towel dry it with a lint-free cloth. Now, go back to the mouse and pick up your can of compressed air (cans of compressed air can also be ordered from the MEI/Micro Center for about a third of the computer store price, and they contain nothing that will harm the ozone). Blow any remaining fuzz out of the mouse cavity, even if you can’t see any. Pop the ball back in, and replace the compartment door. Your mouse will behave as if it were brand new. One more thing to note: If the mouse has Teflon™ glides on the bottom, they pick up gummy, goop as well. Clean them with rubbing alcohol and a cotton swab. Mice need to be cleaned at a minimum of about once a month to keep them operating reliably. If your computer has a trackball, it, too, needs to have the ball wiped off with rubbing alcohol, the dust blown out, and the rollers cleaned. Follow the same procedures as with the mouse.

The outside or cover of the mouse tends to become the dirtiest part of the computer. The same mild household cleaner and lint-free rag you used to clean the keyboard can be used to clean the mouse case. A cotton swab will also be useful in getting dirt out of the seams in the mouse case: there is no need to take it apart.