

4Kids.org marks 10 years of family education via Internet

ALTEC service appears in nearly 75 newspapers

A decade ago, when the Internet was just starting to make its way into homes, a group at KU stepped forward to help families and children realize the Web's educational potential.

Now, 10 years and 500 installments later, www.4kids.org is continuing to help kids learn with the Web, while constantly adapting to stay on the cutting edge of technology.

A team of educators and students, with support from the Advanced Learning In Technologies Education Consortia, launched 4Kids, a weekly newspaper feature with a companion Web site. Universal Press Syndicate distributes it to nearly 75 newspapers across the nation, with a circulation of about 3 million.

The project features three child-oriented Web sites each week. The sites all contain educational components, such as games, stories and interactive features to keep kids interested in learning. The sites are kept in a database called "Cool Spots."

"That feature is neat. Kids can rate which sites they like the best," said Melanie Bacon, project manager at the Center for Research on Learning.

One of 4Kids' most popular features is the "Ask Amy" column. Named for KU student Amy Schimmel, who started working with 4Kids when she was 14, the



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The ALTEC 4Kids team, from left, David Scherrer, Web designer; Leslie Blood, graduate research assistant; Erin Castaneda, copywriter; and Melanie Bacon, senior project leader, consult in a conference room in JRP. The group works on the Web site www.4kids.org, which recently reached its 10th anniversary and 500th issue.

feature fields kids' questions on topics varying as widely as topics for a science report to building their own Web site. Instead of providing an answer, the column guides kids to resources that can help them solve the problems on their own.

In the ever-evolving world of technology, the staff at ALTEC and 4Kids is working to keep up by adding components that can be downloaded to PDAs and personal MP3 players such as iPods.

"We want to make 4Kids an interactive place youth can go and realize it's fun to learn," Bacon said. "In the future 4Kids might include a component that teachers could use to track their students' progress in learning experiences that address state standards in a fun, gaming environment."

Teachers aren't the only ones who can keep up with progress of young visitors. Parents, grandparents and students deliver feedback, and the occasional handwritten letter, stating how helpful 4Kids has been.

Just as technology has changed, educational trends have shifted to focus more on math, science and literacy, and 4Kids has responded by placing a greater emphasis on those curriculum areas. The project's goal has not changed, however.

"I hope children who visit 4Kids online or read it in the paper are realizing that learning can be fun and that the Internet is a really safe and available resource in education," said Leslie Blood, a doctoral student in education and 4Kids team leader.