Parents in their 30s and 40s who may have had minimal exposure to computers may be puzzled by their children's expertise with computer terms and operation. Wanting to do the best thing for their children, these parents feel pressure, which is unfortunately often accompanied by confusion, to purchase a personal computer (PC) for their home.

How can computer illiterate parents make wise choices in the high-tech computer market?

Before going to the store

The first step in deciding whether a computer is actually needed for the home is to know what you want a computer for, says Mike Totaro of the ESL College of Business Administration. He advises potential computer buyers to ask, "What will it do for me and my family?" Totaro thinks that if a person can justify getting a computer, he or she will then be satisfied with it.

A further consideration is whether you want the computer for your child only or for the entire family, according to Wanda Zerangue, a computer science teacher at Lafayette High School.

If the computer would be used primarily for word processing (letters, Christmas lists, recipes), that should be the goal of your computer search. Would it be used for bookkeeping? Desktop publishing? Do you have a small business that could use a computer? Don't buy a computer if all you need is a word processor or a good typewriter.

All of the many computers on the market can be grouped into three main groups or types: Apple-Macintosh, the IBM, and the IBM compatibles or clones. The Apple-Macintosh lean toward computer graphics and are user-friendly. The IBM are generally considered "business computers," and people who are involved in or inclined toward math and science will gravitate to them. The IBM compatibles or clones use IBM software, but generally cost less than the IBM.

The Mac's advantage is its friendly, graphical user interface that makes most programs a matter of pointing at a picture with a mouse and clicking a button," says Michael J. Hirnweitz in a syndicated column on computers. If the computer commands frighten you, the Mac's graphics may attract you to this particular computer.

"The Mac is generally regarded as the leader in the field of desktop publishing. If you want to do a newsletter or brochure for your organization or business, the Macintosh might be the computer for your home.

"Some people fear buying an Apple IIe, which is good used in elementary school classes, but is on the low end of the price range, because they have heard that Apple is going to discontinue this machine or that it cannot have much internal memory. Not true," says Darrell Landry of Educational Associates and MicroAge, La. "Apple has made a commitment to stand behind its IIe's, and hard drives can be installed in the IIe and the 2GS (graphics and sound).

However, if you are interested in accounting and data processing, the IBM or an IBM clone may be the better choice because it has a larger memory. Barbara Reat of Northgate Radio Shack recommends the Tandy, which is an IBM compatible (meaning you can use IBM software on it). The Tandy 1000 TL2 and TL2 have expansion capabilities. Moore says that the fact that Radio Shack is open until 9 p.m. might help out those who work until 5 p.m. and have trouble getting to visit a computer store.

"Only one computer allows IBM, Macintosh, and Apple IIe software to be run on it.

That's the Apple Mac LC," says Landry. IBM can run some Apple software, but not Macintosh software. If you would like to be able to use virtually any software on the market, the LC might be the machine you would choose. This computer marks the beginning of a new trend in computer technology—the migration of different families of computers to the market. And there will be more of this to come.

In July, most newspapers carried articles about the cooperation established between IBM and Apple, which turned control 38 percent of the market, but have been losing ground recently. Apple has had to trim its labor force because of its price cuts, and IBM has lost money this year, possibly due to families purchasing less-expensive IBM clones rather than IBM.

According to Time magazine, these two computer companies will develop an advanced operating system which controls software, integrate Apple's user-friendly Macintosh system into IBM's product line, share IBM's high-speed microprocessors, and seek to develop new high-powered hardware and software to be marketed under both names. If this merger is successful, computer buyers in the near future will have the best of both IBM and Apple worlds.

Parents must do their homework before computer shopping. "Talk with your child's computer science teacher or anyone knowledgeable before you decide what to buy. Get the basics; then go talk with the salespeople.

Ask what are the newest models and how long this particular machine has been around," Zerangue advises.

"Go to the local newsstand and browse through the computer magazines available. Some are extremely technical, but many will be helpful—even to the computer illiterate. One that might be handy is the Computer Buyer's Guide and Handbook, which prints street and list prices for any computer, monitor, printer, etc. that you might want. Using this as a guide, you can go shopping with a clear price in mind.

Money is generally a top consideration when people decide they want a computer. "Most people will invest $1,500 up in a computer. If you're spending that much money—more than the average refrigerator, you want to buy something that will grow with the customer," says Chris Matthews at Entré Computers, an IBM dealership. "If you can't afford to buy one now, wait and save your money until you can," he says. But don't make the mistake of going shopping without a clear picture of how much you will be willing and able to spend for the computer, adding in extra for software.

Should parents simply purchase the same kind of computer their child uses at school? If the Lafayette Parish School Board's sales tax passes in the fall, children in Lafayette Parish will have even more experience with computers. Totaro thinks this should be a strong consideration, since if the child is using an Apple computer at school, he may not adjust to an IBM or vice versa.

Schools in the Acadiana area have Tandy Computers, IBM, IBM compatibles, Apple IIe's, Apple 2GS's, and Macintosh Computers. However, since this is usually a major investment for a family, he advises that the family purchase a computer that can be expanded and grow with the child. Furthermore, parents should consider that elementary schools often use Apple IIe's, while few will be found in the high schools. Their children may actually use several different types of computers during their years of school.

Whatever computer you decide on should have industry-standard parts or be a "name brand computer" that you are sure will be around for a long time, says Totaro. Requesting a computer with industry-standard parts allows you to have your computer—if it is a clone and not an IBM or Apple-Macintosh—serviced in the future. If the parts are not industry standard and the business ceases to exist, you might not be able to get parts and maintain your computer in the future. If you buy your computer from a place other than a computer dealership, you can ask for the phone number of the manufacturer and find out if the computer parts are, indeed, industry standard.

What to do at the store

"Parents should plan to take an entire Saturday off and visit a computer center with the kids," Chris Matthews says.

You might want to visit stores which carry each type of computer and its software—the Apple-Macintosh, the IBM, and the IBM compatible—before selecting the specific type of computer for your home.

Almost every computer literate person recommends that the first stop in computer shopping be not the computer itself (hardware), but the programs (software) available. Potential computer owners should look through catalogs or browse the shelves of computer stores in order to familiarize themselves with what a computer can do for them. Sales personnel should demonstrate the software and answer questions for them.

Speed is an important consideration, but Totaro warns potential buyers of salespeople who will sometimes push customers toward the biggest, the fastest and the most expensive. The customer should get what suits the job he/she wants to do, not what the salesperson wants to sell," he says. Totaro suggests letting the salesperson know that you've done research.
will continue to do so—that you are not interested in the tech buzz words, but in a solution to your needs.

Personally, Zerange doesn't recommend that anyone buy a computer with less than a 40 megabyte (Mb) hard drive and with one, but preferably two megs of RAM (Random Access Memory). (A megabyte is approximately one million characters.) The hard disk has memory, and many people only consider the memory for this when buying a computer. But RAM memory is temporary. It is the virtual memory of the computer for use while you are working on a program. The hard drive memory is where you will store it when you have completed your work.

The new Apple-Macintosh System 7 will only work on two or more megabytes of RAM. In fact, many software programs will not work on a hard drive, no matter what the size, unless there is sufficient RAM as well. A 40 meg hard drive with 2 megabytes of RAM is a lot of memory, allowing the family to use most software programs and store most of its created documents without having constantly to find and insert floppy disks into the computer. With this much memory in your computer, you will not make the mistake of selecting a software program that you can't use because of insufficient memory.

As software evolves, it requires more memory, and so if you feel you can't afford this much memory at the time of purchase, be sure the computer you buy has additional memory installed later.

Be sure to ask the salesperson about the computer's warranty. Most come with a 90-day parts-and-labor warranty, and then that's all.

Teachers and college students can obtain special prices and services from many computer companies. Be sure to inquire about such special prices if you are an educator or a college student.

Final considerations

Today computers may be purchased at Sam's Wholesale, Office Depot, most department stores, and even through the mail. Should you need support—just like a car—maybe you wonder: "Is the computer you bought set up as you expected?"

However, Matthew warns, "A computer needs support—just like a car—maybe you wonder: "Is the computer you bought set up as you expected?"

But after you have your computer, you might want to check mail order places for good prices on software.

Also, Zerange says that if you have an old computer that you have outgrown, you can get some money for it by donating it to your child's school and thereby receiving a sizable deduction on your income tax. As computers become more and more a necessary part of daily existence in America and our children become better and better acquainted with them, parents need to consider very seriously whether a computer for their home should be their next purchase.