PARENTS of screen-loving pre-schoolers can relax. A new Australian study has found four-year-olds who spend more time on the computer have better knowledge of the alphabet than others. The Murdoch Children's Research Institute survey of 1500 four-year-olds found more than half used a computer at least once a week.

They found this was closely tied to letter recognition, which is linked to reading and spelling ability. Researcher Professor Sheena Reilly said greater computer use among pre-schoolers "appears to have a positive association with emerging literacy development" and was much better than watching TV. Computer products, such as keyboard games, are marketed to children as young as nine months old. "These days you do see lots of kids playing games on iPads and iPhones and even reading books on them," Prof Reilly said.

She said the link between literacy and computers remained significant even when researchers controlled for factors such as socioeconomic status and parental reading ability.

"It is possible that the kinds of activities pre-school children engage in when using a computer, including interacting with the letters on the keyboard, stimulate letter knowledge," Prof Reilly said. But she acknowledged it was "also possible that pre-school children with strong emergent literacy skills and good letter knowledge are more likely to choose to engage in computer-based activities than those with weaker skills".

Prof Reilly said the study did not distinguish between educational and recreational computer use. Canterbury mother of three and GP Kirstin Charlesworth said her son Lachlan, 5, played letter and number games on the computer.

"It's no replacement for one-on-one time with a parent, but high-quality computer time has its place," Dr Charlesworth said. "I think it's important that kids go to school with some idea about computers and how to use them."