

Computer Craze Among German Kids

THE computer sales room in a large department store in Hamburg has become a favourite "children's playground" youngsters spend hours of their free time there deeply immersed in studying instruction manuals, banging on keyboards and developing individual programmes on the screen.

All over West Germany, the computer craze has caught up with the younger population. A generation of computer kids is growing up similar to what began in the United States a few years ago.

The hardware has become increasingly available. Computer industry estimates say there are about 300,000 home computers at present in West German households with an additional 200,000 likely to be sold this year alone. Some 80 per cent of those computers are being used by people below the age of 20.

What started out as a passive preoccupation with video games among young people has evolved into an effort to programme the computer with individual ideas. And the kids apparently have great fun doing

that. King among them is he who can devise the best computer commands for game strategies such as mock battles organised "computer holiday

on the screen.

Since instruction courses are still rare in schools, privately organised "computer holiday

camps" have sprung up everywhere to satisfy the growing demand. For a fee of about 250 dollars per week children are taught the beginners computer language called "basic".

Instructors have been stunned to watch the "whiz kids" of the computer age grasp the materials with extraordinary speed and ease.

"They just glance at a page in the manual and know what is going on where I have to go over it twice," said one of the teachers. He had to expand the curriculum of his course, because the kids had grasped in two days what was to have been taught in one week.

West Germany's schools are struggling to catch up with the rising interest of their pupils in computer sciences. Surveys in schools that offer such courses show that one-third of the pupils there chose to enrol in them.

Experts and politicians meanwhile have discovered the issue and variety of proposals are being kicked around on how to better integrate computers into the educational system. West German Educational

Minister Dorothee Wilms recently disclosed that between 30 to 80 per cent of the schools in different West German states are equipped with computers today.

The states of Baden-Wuerttemberg and Bavaria early this year passed new legislation introducing computer instruction courses to all levels of the school system.

Experiments with using computers in schools have been funded in preceding years with about 20 million dollars. But the computer industry well aware of the growing market potential, is demanding that an extra 160 to 240 million dollars be spent in coming years.

Many computer kids have turned their pastime into a profession. Some of them are selling their own computer programmes or those of big companies after managing to break the elaborate safeguarding codes—and in some cases the law as well.

A youngster, who was arrested in Hanover, recently stands accused of having cost computer firms a total of nine million dollars by illegally copying their programmes—Evelyn Bot



"But I've already defrosted a chicken."