

TV for Babies: Does It Help or Hurt?

Written by Administrator

Friday, 06 March 2009 09:14 - Last Updated Friday, 06 March 2009 09:24

 By Alice Park Tuesday, Mar. 03, 2009

Early parenting choices are never clear-cut, and deciding whether to allow your infant to watch television or DVDs ranks as one of the more perplexing.

Thanks to marketing claims for TV shows and DVDs created for babies, many parents believe that watching educational programming will stimulate infants' brains and actually promote learning. It's a seductive line of reasoning. Certainly, exposing a baby to brain-engaging DVDs will put him on an early path to becoming, well, a baby Einstein, right? Maybe not. The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends no television time for toddlers younger than 2, in large part because no studies have yet established that TV exposure improves babies' learning. Now a new study published in the current issue of Pediatrics confirms that position. (See the 100 best TV shows of all time.)

Marie Evans Schmidt, a research associate at the Center on Media & Child Health at Children's Hospital Boston, studied more than 800 youngsters from birth to 3 years, recording the time they spent watching television or DVDs as reported by their mothers, as well as their performance on language and motor-skill tests. On average, the babies spent 1.2 hr. per day watching TV during their first two years of life, slightly less than the average viewing time reported in previous studies.

In her initial analysis, Schmidt found that babies who spent more time in front of the TV performed worse on language and motor-skill tests at age 3 than those who watched less. But once Schmidt and her team controlled for other factors — the mother's educational status and household income — the relationship between TV-viewing and cognitive development disappeared. That means that TV-viewing alone did not appear to influence babies' brain development; a parent's education and finances mattered more. "Initially it looked like TV-viewing was associated with cognitive development," says Schmidt, "but in fact TV-viewing is an outgrowth of other characteristics of the home environment that lead to lower test scores." (Read "Are We Failing Our Geniuses?")

The current study did not investigate these home factors, but other research has suggested that mothers with lower education and income tend not to read to their babies as much as better-educated moms and that their vocabulary and grammar skills may be more limited, leading to insufficient verbal interaction with their children. Mothers with less education also tend to talk to their children less overall; women with more education are more likely to elaborate details and tell stories to their kids, even about ordinary events and concepts. And studies suggest that parents' talking and gesturing frequently to their babies early on have a significant impact on their children's vocabulary and language competence by school age.

This study is only the second to track TV-viewing and cognitive development in infants over time. Its results diverge from those of the other longitudinal study, conducted by Dr. Dimitri Christakis at Seattle Children's Research Institute, which found that DVD-viewing hindered toddlers' ability to learn vocabulary. In that study, with each additional hour spent in front of a screen, babies at 8 to 16 months learned six to eight fewer vocabulary words than infants who stayed away from videos. "We don't have any definitive answers yet as to what effects TV-viewing can have on infants with respect to cognitive outcomes," says Christakis. "But here is what we do know — there is absolutely no benefit to this viewing despite claims that continue to be made by commercial products." (See nine kid foods to avoid.)

While Schmidt's study found no benefit, it ultimately found no negative effect of watching TV. The researcher offers a few reasons: for one, the children in her study reported

TV for Babies: Does It Help or Hurt?

Written by Administrator

Friday, 06 March 2009 09:14 - Last Updated Friday, 06 March 2009 09:24

less time viewing TV and DVDs than previous surveys of the same-age population; it's possible that her study group did not meet the threshold dose of TV exposure that triggered the negative effects found in Christakis' research. Schmidt's study also stopped following the toddlers at age 3; she acknowledges that some cognitive changes may not occur until children are a few years older.

TV exposure in babies younger than 2 doesn't do any good, Schmidt and Christakis agree. But does that mean a few minutes in front of the tube will sentence a baby to remedial classes for the rest of his life? "What I tell parents is 'Ask yourself why you're having your baby watch TV,' " says Christakis. "If you absolutely need a break to take a shower or make dinner, then the risks are quite low. But if you are doing it because you think it's actually good for your child's brain, then you need to rethink that, because there is no evidence of benefit and certainly a risk of harm at high viewing levels."

If you want to stimulate your baby's brain, he says, try simply playing with him. In a recent study, Christakis showed that basic activities like playing with blocks with an 18-month-old can improve his language skills six months later.

Source: <http://www.time.com/time/health/article/0,8599,1882560,00.html>