

# Should Babies and Toddlers Watch Television?

*Practica Program Newsletter January 2010 by Lizette van Huyssteen*



- ★ The University of Washington studied more than 1,000 families and reported that for every hour that infants of 8-16 months watch videos such as Baby Einstein and Brainy Baby they understood 6-8 fewer words than other babies who were not exposed to such videos.<sup>1</sup> Disney, who owns Baby Einstein, is now offering refunds to disgruntled American parents.<sup>2</sup>
- ★ In the 2004 *Journal of Pediatrics*, a study from Seattle examined more than 2,500 children younger than 36 months, and found that for every hour of television watched daily, the risk of attention problems at age 7 increases nearly 10 per cent. They were more likely to be easily confused, impulsive, restless or obsessive about things in their lives. The problems were similar to symptoms for ADHD.<sup>3</sup>
- ★ The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends no TV before age 2 and that children over 2 be limited to one to two hours a day of educational material on TV or other screen media.<sup>4</sup>
- ★ A study commissioned by the Australian government recommended that children under 2 should be banned from watching TV and electronic media such as computer games. It also said those aged 2 to 5 should watch no more than one hour a day, as exposure to TV at an early age could delay

language development, affect concentration and lead to obesity.

The government responded in October 2009 by announcing that it will issue guidelines advising parents to prevent under-2s from watching TV.<sup>2</sup>

- ★ In August 2009, France's broadcasting authority banned the airing of TV shows aimed at children under 3, after French psychologists found that: "Television viewing hurts the development of children under three years old and poses a certain number of risks, encouraging passivity, slow language acquisition, over-excitedness, troubles with sleep and concentration, as well as dependence on screens."<sup>5</sup>

## Why does television have such a negative effect on children during the early years?

Adults can add meaning to what they hear and see on television, because they have real life experiences, language and a frame of reference to draw from.

Young children, on the other hand, stare at the sights, sounds and rapidly changing scenes without any understanding. Using Positron Imaging Technology scans, researchers have found that television stimulates only the visual and listening areas of a baby's brain. Areas that are used for understanding language and

communicating, learning, thinking, memorising, expressing personality and fine-tuning social behavior remain inactive and unstimulated.<sup>6</sup>

In contrast to this, a child's brain lights up like a Christmas tree when a parent reads to him while pointing to pictures and interacting with the child. When you show your child a stationary picture of a bear and tell him a story about what the bear is doing, his brain naturally responds by forming a mental picture of the animal in his mind's eye and imagining its movements. When the child watches television, the television does all the work for him.

When you read a story to your child, the language areas in his brain light up as his brain actively adds meaning to the words that he hears and the thinking area is active as he orders the information in time. This doesn't happen while watching television. Characters on the screen continue to move regardless of whether a child understands what is happening or not. The television, once again, does all the work for the child and the language and thinking areas in his brain remain passive.

As you read a story to your child, you add emotion and you read your child's responses and react appropriately. You'll spend a little more time on a page when needed, and page back to remind your child of what you've just read when he loses concentration to teach him to focus and regulate his emotions. The television set doesn't do these things.

If you're an adult, 'spacing out' in front of the television may have its benefits. In fact, many people use the television set to help to clear their minds and help them to fall asleep.

But young children are vulnerable in a special way. A child's brain is being wired during the first years at a rate of half a million brain cell connections per second!<sup>6</sup> Experiences shape a child's brain and the more often he uses certain pathways in his brain, the more 'hardwired' those neural pathways will become.<sup>7</sup>

Watching television literally rewires a child's brain during the early years. The child's brain gets so used to side-stepping the language and thinking areas and reacting to information without understanding, that it becomes the standard way in which it processes information; not only when the child is watching television, but in the real world as well!

**In the light of the above, why do businesses continue to produce television channels and DVD's specifically aimed at babies?**

In Britain statistics are not available for babies, but in similar countries such as Australia, the average four-month-old gazes at the box for 44 minutes every day. In the US, under 2s watch 1.2 hours a day on average.<sup>2</sup> For those who are involved in creating and marketing of baby products and advertising, the best argument seems to be that since parents are allowing babies to watch TV anyway, and most don't seem to know about the dangers of television, they might as well be given what they are willing to pay for.

**I haven't been aware of the effects of television on babies. Have I done irrevocable damage to my 3 year old by allowing her to watch television when she was a baby?**

To help answer your question, I refer to a remark made by a pediatrician, Dr Martin Ward-Platt, as quoted by Helen Rumbelow in the article that she wrote for The Times:

*"Of course, the thing that really makes the difference for a baby is interaction with a caregiver and there is nothing we can invent as a people substitute. But if a child watches some TV and is exposed to people for the rest of the time, they will do fine. What we don't know is where the limit is, where you start to hold children back."*<sup>2</sup>

If you have a strong immune system, your body can fight off small viral attacks. If you exercise every day, your metabolic rate will rise and you will be able to eat a piece of cake every now and then without fearing that it will add centimeters to your hipline.

Similarly, a baby, who receives large amounts of loving one-on-one stimulation from the important people in her life, will have a brain that is more densely wired and therefore more resilient to the impact of short periods of television watching. I'm not saying that the fact that you are a Practica Parent gives you a ticket to be irresponsible. No parent, who is familiar with the research, would knowingly expose his child to something that is potentially harmful.

But you didn't know about the dangers when your child was a baby. Now you can at least find some solace in the fact that, as a Practica Parent, you have counteracted the effects of television on your child's developing brain with the hundreds of healthy interactive games that you've been playing with your child during the early years.

Also, since your family is now probably going to spend less time in front of the television from now on, it's good to know that as a Practica Parent you will have enough ideas and tools to make the television set pale in comparison!

In our next newsletter, February 2010, we will be giving you tips on how to make wise television choices for children older than 3 years old.

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2. Why watching TV won't turn your Baby into a Genius. *The Times*, 29 October 2009, Helen Rumbelow.
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4. Eh-Oh! Pediatricians Ban TV for Toddlers, David Burke [www.whitedot.org](http://www.whitedot.org)
5. France pulls Plug on TV shows aimed at Babies, *CBC News*, Wednesday, August 20, 2008
6. The Baby Brain-drain, *The Times*, 1 November 2007, Dr Miriam Stoppard
7. Fertile Minds, *The Time Magazine*, by J.Madelein Nash