

Baby Einsteins: Not so smart after all [US] ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

The claim always seemed too good to be true: park your infant in front of a video and, in no time, he or she will be talking and getting smarter than the neighbor's kid. In the latest study on the effects of popular videos such as the "Baby Einstein" and "Brainy Baby" series, researchers find that these products may be doing more harm than good. And they may actually delay language development in toddlers.

Led by Frederick Zimmerman and Dr. Dimitri Christakis, both at the University of Washington, the research team found that with every hour per day spent watching baby DVDs and videos, infants learned six to eight fewer new vocabulary words than babies who never watched the videos. These products had the strongest detrimental effect on babies 8 to 16 months old, the age at which language skills are starting to form. "The more videos they watched, the fewer words they knew," says Christakis. "These babies scored about 10% lower on language skills than infants who had not watched these videos."

It's not the first blow to baby videos, and likely won't be the last. Mounting evidence suggests that passive screen sucking not only doesn't help children learn, but could also set back their development. Last spring, Christakis and his colleagues found that by three months, 40% of babies are regular viewers of DVDs, videos or television; by the time they are two years old, almost 90% are spending two to three hours each day in front of a screen.

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"Babies require face-to-face interaction to learn," says Dr. Vic Strasburger, professor of pediatrics at the University of New Mexico School of Medicine and a spokesperson for the American Academy of Pediatrics. "They don't get that interaction from watching TV or videos. In fact, the watching probably interferes with the crucial wiring being laid down in their brains during early development."

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This growing evidence led the Academy to issue its recommendation in 1999 that no child under two years old watch any television. The authors of the new study might suggest reading instead: children who got daily reading or storytelling time with their parents showed a slight increase in language skills.

Though the popular baby videos and DVDs in the Washington study were designed to stimulate infants' brains, not necessarily to promote language development, parents generally assume that the products' promises to make their babies smarter include improvement of speaking skills. But, says Christakis, "the majority of the videos don't try to promote language; they have rapid scene changes and quick edits, and no appearance of the 'parent-ese' type of speaking that parents use when talking to their babies."

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- reprinted from Time Magazine

Tags: child development ^[2]

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