

Million dollar babies: Why infants can't be hardwired for success

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Author: Mead, Sara

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AVAILABILITY

Full report in pdf [2]

Excerpts from the report:

In the late 1990s and early 2000s, Georgia hospitals sent every newborn baby home with a classical music CD, courtesy of former Governor Zell Miller and his belief that Mozart and Bach promote brain growth and intellectual development in young children. "Listening to music at a very early age," Miller suggested, "affects the spatial-temporal reasoning that underlies math and engineering and even chess."

The Georgia governor has been far from alone in preaching the importance of Bach for babies. Over the past decade, it has become conventional wisdom in many education circles that sufficient stimulation in the first three years of life can go a long way toward hardwiring the brain for success. Bookstores are brimming with books with titles like *Smart-Wiring Your Baby's Brain*, states have launched Smart Start programs, and a booming, multi-billion dollar industry led by companies such as Baby Einstein and Brainy Baby has tapped into parental angst over doing enough for their kids with foreign-language classes for newborns, toddler day spas, and a host of other products and services aimed at unleashing a baby's inner genius.

Lawmakers have been swayed by the argument that if they invest in building brainier babies, they'll collect dividends later in the kids' lives in the form of savings on job training, corrections and welfare. As the advocacy group Kansas Action for Children has argued: "While more than 85 percent of a child's core brain structure is formed by age five, only 2.5 percent of state and federal investments in education and development have occurred by that time."

More darkly, some have seized on the importance of early brain development in an effort to excuse elementary and secondary schools from the difficult task of working hard on behalf of all students—on the grounds that by the time many students get to school they are already hopelessly and permanently behind.

There's a problem, however, with the new conventional wisdom about building brighter babies: It's based on misinterpretations and misapplications of brain research. While neural connections in babies' brains grow rapidly in the early years, adults can't make newborns smarter or more successful by having them listen to Beethoven or play with Einstein-inspired blocks. Nor is there any neuroscience evidence that suggests that the earliest years are a singular window for growth that slams shut once children turn three. To the contrary, the social programs with the strongest evidence of positive long-term impacts, including high-quality preschool programs, take place outside the zero-to-three window.

The new now-or-never stance toward child development has drawn sharp rebukes from leading neuroscientists such as Harvard University's Carla Shatz.³ And the Campaign for a Commercial-Free Childhood, an advocacy group, has filed a complaint with the Federal Trade Commission alleging that Disney (which now owns Baby Einstein), Brainy Babies LLC and other makers of learning products for very young children, have no hard evidence to support the implications of their advertising—that their products will make tots smarter.

Shatz and other experts say that the first three years of children's lives are undeniably important. But they reject the claim that they are the most important years, much less the only years that really matter, in a child's mental development.

But hardly anyone's listening. State and federal governments have poured millions of dollars into programs focused on children from birth through age three, many of which have little evidence of effectiveness. And many parents are in a state of near-paralysis over whether they are sufficiently stimulating their babies' brains.

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