

# Television and Babies: What Do We REALLY Know?

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Television viewing by babies is currently a controversial issue which is receiving a great deal of media coverage. As a university professor and author of several parenting books, I would like to address this issue from my perspective as a child development researcher familiar with the existing literature on the effects of television viewing on babies' development.

As is true of many issues upon which opinions differ, the truth lies somewhere in the middle. Neither position—that television viewing is *bad* for babies or that television viewing is *good* for babies—is supported by the data. Here's what we *do* know:

## PARENT-CHILD INTERACTION

First of all, the data from hundreds of studies support the conclusion that one-on-one interaction between parents and children is critically important to all aspects of early development. *Of course*, that should be high on every parent's "to do" list.

However, one-on-one interaction with parents isn't the only way children learn important lessons. They learn through playing with toys on their own (building towers with blocks, dressing dolls, stacking rings, etc.), watching nature from the safety of a stroller, listening to and learning to sing simple songs, leafing through books on their own, playing with other children, exploring their fingers and toes, etc. In fact, a parent who constantly hovers over a child is denying that child the opportunity to discover new wonders and conquer new challenges on his own. Data show that toddlers take more pride in tasks they have chosen and completed *themselves*.

## THE AMERICAN ACADEMY OF PEDIATRICS (AAP) POLICY

The AAP has taken the strong position that children under the age of 2 shouldn't be exposed to any televised material because "too much television can negatively affect early brain development." Surely they've based this strong conclusion on a solid research foundation.

The truth, however, is that *no* convincing data yet exist to support this conclusion. Sometimes a study from the University of Washington (D. Christakis et al.) is cited as evidence that TV viewing can negatively affect children's language development. However, the details of this study, including its methodology, are flawed and warrant caution in drawing *any* conclusions. Even the recently reported



research from the same laboratory of the effects of the Baby Einstein videos showed only a small, transitory effect on language that had disappeared by 17 months. Much more research and convincing evidence is needed before anyone can draw the conclusion that television viewing has a negative effect on early brain development.

What many other studies have shown, in contrast, is that it's the *content* of what's watched that matters. This is true whether the outcome measures are cognitive ones (e.g., grades in school) or social-emotional ones (e.g., aggression). For example, in terms of early language, data do show that watching television shows that elicit participation, like *Dora the Explorer* and *Blue's Clues*, actually facilitates language development, as do shows that feature simple language in ways children can follow, like *Clifford the Big Red Dog*. Our Baby Signs® DVDs follow these same time-tested teaching strategies to promote infant learning. In fact, our own research shows that Baby Signs® DVDs actually *teach* babies signs.

### **SO WHY DID THE AAP STATE THINGS SO STRONGLY?**

I think I know why. My hunch comes from something I heard Dr. Benjamin Spock himself say once. He said that doctors often try to *scare* their patients in order to keep them from doing extreme things, like not taking their medications long enough. He gave the example of a doctor who says to a mother, "And if you don't give your child these vitamins *every single day*, he'll develop rickets!" He continued, "That's how we make them pay attention!"

So, what I think is that the AAP is really targeting (a) parents who use TV as a babysitter, not just occasionally, but routinely for long periods of time, (b) parents who let their child watch alone, not just occasionally, but routinely for long periods of time, and (c) parents who pay no attention at all to content, not just occasionally, but routinely for long periods of time. In other words, they may be trying to scare irresponsible parents into behaving responsibly. The problem is that parents who are by nature "responsible" are now being made to feel like bad parents if they use televised material or videos at all.

### **THE BOTTOM LINE**

Remember the old adage, "Everything in moderation"? Well, that seems to be the safest position on this issue, too. Television, like any other tool or toy, can be a wonderful addition to a young child's life—if it is used responsibly.

