



Educational DVDs: What Helps Babies Learn and What Doesn't

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Parents of young children frequently look to educational products or approaches in order to give their child's development a head start. In recent years, products such as the Brainy Baby and Baby Einstein DVD series, as well as baby sign language products and programs have become very popular. Parents have come to expect that these "educational" products will give their child some educational advantage. But do they? Recent research has produced some surprising results about these widely-used products.

Baby DVD Products: A concerning effect on infants' language development

At least two studies published since 2007 have concluded that Baby Einstein and Brainy Baby DVDs provide no benefit to children, and, according to one of the studies, might actually slow down language development in infants between eight to 16 months of age. This study, which tracked how much time infants and toddlers spend viewing DVDs and television programs, as well as the content of these programs, found that for every hour per day that babies 8-16 months old watched educational programs, they knew on average six to eight fewer words than babies who didn't watch them. In addition, the DVDs and videos had no effects, positive or negative, on toddlers between 17 and 24 months of age.

A 2010 study led by a psychologist at the University of California produced a similar result. As Reuters reported, "the earlier a child started watching Baby Einstein DVDs ... the smaller his or her vocabulary was" (though the study did not determine that DVD viewing in itself was the cause).

The lead researcher of the 2007 study, Frederick Zimmerman said, "The most important fact to come from this study is there is no clear evidence of a benefit coming from baby DVDs and videos and there is some suggestion of harm." The bottom line, he says, is that the more time a child spends watching baby DVDs, the more harmful it appears to be.

This finding makes sense if one thinks about what is known about how children develop language. Children learn best in situations in which they interact back and forth with a caring adult, who instinctively makes adjustments to their speech, intonation and general interactive behaviour based on what the child does or says. In short, infants and toddlers benefit most when their parents encourage them to communicate about everyday things and respond to them with interest and enthusiasm. Watching a DVD does not allow the child to learn in this manner and may not, therefore, promote learning.

Baby Sign Language: No long-term advantage

Baby sign language is a relatively new phenomenon, but there are already many products and services on the market aimed at parents who want to teach hearing infants to sign. Advocates of baby sign language claim that it enables a child to express his wants and needs before he has the language to do so (thereby reducing frustration for the whole family). There are also claims that Baby Sign gives infants an intellectual advantage. Like baby DVDs, the trend is popular but controversial, and has resulted in a great deal of research.

A group of experts at the Universities of Ottawa and Waterloo in Ontario, Canada decided to review all of the studies on Baby Sign to determine if there is any research that supports its use. In an overview of nearly 1,200 studies on baby sign language, they found that only five studies showed that children who were taught Baby Sign had more advanced language development than children who did not. However, the impact of Baby Sign had disappeared by age two, when it was impossible to tell the difference between the language skills of children who had and had not been taught Baby Sign.

What should parents be looking for to give their child a headstart?

Parents should insist on some proof, preferably from independent researchers, that educational products actually make a difference to their child's development.

Parents don't need educational products to help their child develop the best possible language skills. Hanen programs and the Hanen approach are founded on the belief (overwhelmingly supported by research) that parents are their child's best language teachers and that children learn to communicate in their everyday interactions with their parents and caregivers. The more children are engaged in enjoyable interactions that go back and forth a number of times, the more language a child learns.

Hanen's *It Takes Two to Talk*[®] approach

The *It Takes Two to Talk* approach is well described in the Hanen parent guidebook, *It Takes Two to Talk*, which is written in simple language and beautifully illustrated. This book shows parents how to promote a child's ability to communicate using practical strategies that have been shown to make a difference to the child's language development.

In *It Takes Two to Talk*, the following important factors that boost a child's language development are described:

► *How much parents talk with their child*

The amount of time parents spend talking back and forth with their child, listening to him and responding with interest to whatever he tells them makes a significant difference to his language development. The more language a child hears in these back and forth conversations, right from birth, the better the child's language skills will be.

► *How parents respond to what their child says or communicates to them*

Parents foster their child's language learning when they:

- respond to what the child says or does by sticking with what he is communicating about (and not talking about something different or testing to see how much he knows)
- contribute an idea that builds on what he has said (with or without words); or
- ask a “real” question about what he has said (one that doesn't test how much he knows, but helps him think about what he is talking about. For example, “What is your bear going to eat?” versus “What colour is your bear?”)

Compare two interactions, one which does not foster language learning and the other, which does...

Two year old Marcus sees water dripping from a tap in the bathroom, ... :

Interaction 1

Marcus: Look! Water (water is dripping from the tap)

Mom: Oh. Ok (shuts it off). There you go.

Not much learning occurs in this conversation.

Interaction 2

Marcus: Look! Water (water is dripping from the tap)

Mom: Oh. The water is dripping. Drip, drip. Feel it.

Marcus puts his hand under the water: Dip, dip

Mom: Yes, the water is dripping.

Marcus: Why Mummy?

Mom: Mommy didn't switch the tap off properly. D'you wanna help me turn the water off?

Marcus: Ok. Water off.

Mom: Come, push the tap back hard (helps Marcus push tap so it is off)

Marcus: (pushes). No more water

Mom: Now there's no more water because we switched it off.

Marcus: Water on

Mom: Should we switch the water on again? D'you want to see the water drip?

Marcus: Dip, more dip

Parent: Ok, let me turn on the tap just a little . . there it goes, drip, drip

Marcus: Dip, dip. More dip dip.

This conversation continues back and forth for a full five minutes. Look how much learning can occur within a simple conversation about water! Not only did Marcus learn that water comes slowly out of the tap when it's not turned off properly, but he learned a new word: “drip”. This is one example of the kind of interaction parents learn from *It Takes Two to Talk*.

Research has shown that this is the ideal way for a child to learn language - during everyday conversations with the important people in his life, who listen to him, contribute ideas to his ideas and add some interesting information, in bits at a time that he can understand. *This is language learning at its best!*

References

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About The Hanen Centre

Founded in 1975, The Hanen Centre is a Canadian not-for-profit charitable organization with a global reach. Its mission is to provide parents, caregivers, early childhood educators and speech-language pathologists with the knowledge and training they need to help young children develop the best possible language, social and literacy skills. This includes children who have or are at risk for language delays, those with developmental challenges such as autism, and those who are developing typically.

For more information, please visit www.hanen.org.

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