



COGNITIVE GROWTH

Infant TV-viewing no help nor harm: study

TRALEE PEARCE

March 3, 2009

For some parents, plunking their baby in front of the "idiot box" is a necessary evil that allows for a few free minutes to themselves. Others see television as an educational tool, believing the right programs and videos can make their babies smarter.

New research, published yesterday in the journal *Pediatrics*, suggests that when it comes to the brain development of infants, though, TV viewing neither helps nor harms. In a study of the TV viewing habits and cognitive development of 872 children from birth to age 3, researchers found no link between television watching under the age of 2 and language or visual motor skills development by age 3.

Lead author Marie Evans Schmidt, a developmental psychologist and instructor of pediatrics at Harvard Medical School, says the biggest implication of her work may be for parents who think they're giving their children an intellectual leg-up with interactive television shows and video series such as *Baby Einstein*.

"Studies have shown that a fairly sizable number of parents think infants being exposed to TV makes them smarter or helps their brains," says Dr. Schmidt, who is also a research associate at the Center on Media and Child Health at the Children's Hospital Boston. "We found no evidence of that."

The study gleaned data from Project Viva, a continuing longitudinal survey of Massachusetts's mothers and children. In addition to health and demographic details, mothers reported how much television their children were watching at six months, age 1 and age 2. At age 3, children were tested using two standard development tests, including the Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test.

The results were adjusted to exclude a number of socioeconomic, health and ethnicity factors. Infants in families with lower incomes and less maternal education tended to watch more TV and scored slightly lower on the tests at 3, as did non-white children. But the study does not suggest a direct link between that increased TV viewing and the lower scores.

On average, children in the study watched just less than an hour of TV a day, a little less than American averages calculated by other studies - but more than the zero hours recommended by the American Academy of Pediatrics for children under the age of 2.

Indeed, parents should not think this research lets them off the hook on the TV front, Dr. Schmidt says. Other studies suggest negative cognitive effects may show up at six years old. (She will revisit the children in her study when they are tested again at age 7.)

And while there may not be detrimental effects on cognitive development, Dr. Schmidt says parents should heed other studies linking TV viewing to obesity, sleep disturbances and attention problems. Dr. Schmidt's own previous research has linked mere background television to disruptions in children's play and interactions with parents.

"I would still urge parents to be cautious about exposing their kids to TV, within the realm of what's possible for them," she says.

Television viewing, while perhaps not harmful in and of itself, can also leach time away from other activities, she points out. "Kids who are being constantly entertained by someone else, whether it is an activity or through television or computer games, are they really going to have the ample time and opportunity to really play alone creatively and with friends?"

Dimitri Christakis, a pediatrician and children's media expert, agrees. His recent research found that playing with simple toys such as building blocks can have a marked effect on a baby's brain development. Dr. Christakis compared two sets of parents and 18-month-old babies, one given blocks and tips on how to play with them, and one given nothing. Six months later, the group using the blocks had better language development than those who did not.

"While we have no evidence that TV is beneficial, we have evidence that other things are helpful," says Dr. Christakis, director of the Center for Child Health, Behavior and Development at Seattle Children's Hospital and professor of pediatrics at the University of Washington.

His own research has found that up to 90 per cent of children younger than age 2 are already using screen media such as TV and computers daily, a development he characterizes as a continuing experiment on the next generation.

"The pace of science is slower than parents would actually like. Truth is, we're still trying to understand the effects of what has been an explosion in infant viewing in the last 10 years."