The Influence of Media on Young Children’s Development

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Advances in technology have led to a steady increase in the amount and type of media that young children interact with on a daily basis. While the long term impact of the burgeoning role of technology in the lives of very young children is yet to be known, researchers are beginning to explore how they interact with and learn from various forms of media.

Q: A few months ago I went to my niece’s baby shower, and she received “educational” videos for young children and babies. I would love to start with your thoughts on what we mean when we say something is educational, and is it true that there is such a thing as educational media?

A: It’s really interesting when you think about it. For the first time in history infants and toddlers are spending time with objects other than with people. There’s been a lot of concern about the nature of these videos and television shows. So, what’s meant by educational media? It’s typically an attempt to craft a particular message for a specific age group of children that is thought to be within their ability to comprehend and to learn from. Can you have educational media? Absolutely. The evidence of more than 40 years of Sesame Street has demonstrated that people can develop quality educational media for preschool children (Fisch & Truglio, 2001). The jury is somewhat out regarding the development of educational media for children less than 2 years old, although I can say that researchers know much more today about how babies interact with video than we knew even 4 or 5 years ago. (Courage & How, 2010)

Q: What have you been working on or are you aware of that is particularly striking in terms of how babies learn when they’re watching a screen?

A: One of the things we know, and parents know this really well, is that babies are engaged with the medium and that they react to the medium. It’s not just that their eyes are glued on the screen, but they demonstrate some evidence of understanding what goes on by the way they follow the screen with their eyes, occasionally by the way they laugh, or express themselves in front of the screen. We shouldn’t discount that information about the nature of how babies are learning from screen media.

Researchers also have done some experimental studies in controlled environments over the last 5 years which suggest that babies can make sense, starting at around 18 months, of what they see, and use that information to solve problems (Lauricella, Gola, & Calvert, 2011; O’Doherty, Troseth, Shimp, Goldenberg, Akhtar, & Saylor, 2011, Zack, Barr, Gerhardstein, Dickerson, & Meltzoff, 2009). So, there’s growing evidence that babies can learn from these videos. And we probably will become even more effective in developing educational materials. When they are crafted to meet the developmental needs of a particular target age group, we can demonstrate that learning occurs.

Abstract
Ellen Wartella, PhD, a leading scholar of the role of media in children’s development, responds to questions that explore how children interact with and learn from various forms of media. She discusses how technology is having an impact on parents and children and provides some context for how parents and caregivers can make informed decisions about using media with young children in ways that best support their emerging developmental skills.
Q: One of the big problems parents have is the glut on the market—there’s so much out there. When parents are looking to make good choices, could you talk a little about what to look for and what to avoid?

A: First, parents should look to see if the content will be of interest to their child. So, if your child is interested in animals, and you have a lot of books with animal sounds, then a video that uses language to teach children about animals, or about nature, is probably one that they’ll be engaged by. Secondly, children younger than 18 to 20 months tend not to be engaged by narrative. And so you probably want to look for narrative material for slightly older children. And by narratives I mean story-based. Although very simple stories might be appropriate between about 9 months and 18 months. And by simple stories I mean just a video that shows perhaps an animal walking through a field, or a child picking up a flower from a field. We’re finding that children in these early ages are engaged by very simple attempts to teach children language labels for objects.

So, things that are very loud, and have a lot of sound effects, and are fast-moving are probably not very good for this really young age.

Q: The American Academy of Pediatrics has issued a statement that children should not be spending any time in front of screens before they’re 2 years old. Is this too extreme? Do you think it’s unrealistic? And if so, how much TV or media should babies and toddlers be watching?

A: It’s certainly unrealistic when we look at evidence such as from the Kaiser Family Foundation studies (Rideout & Hamel, 2006), looking at children from 6 months to 6 years old. In that age group they’re spending about an hour a day with television or videos. And even children younger than 2 years are spending about 30–35 minutes a day with video.

The American Academy of Pediatrics just last year revised its 1999 statement saying no TV and no screens for children less than 2 years old, to advising caution with parents using screens for babies under 2 (American Academy of Pediatrics, 2010). By that they mean caution in not only the amount of time that the babies are spending in front of a screen—because we know that the best situation and context for babies to learn is to have caring adults interacting with them. So you want to spend time with your babies interacting with them more than you want to put them in front of a screen.

Researchers know that parents have multiple motivations for showing babies and toddlers screen information. They think that it is going to help them. They observe that their children are learning language, or colors, or somehow interacting and engaged with the screen. Sometimes they need to have time away from the baby and they want them in a safe environment, and putting them in front of the screen is a way for the parent to be able to do something else.

Q: I think there’s a certain pride they take that their kids are using the latest technology.

A: You’re absolutely right. I think that’s a consequence of the recognition that we live in a technologized world. I would like to point out that there may be both positive and potentially negative long-term consequences, and we don’t know what all of those consequences might be.

Q: Sometimes a child is hanging out in a room where the parents are watching television, and they’re assuming that because the young child doesn’t really understand he’s not affected by it. But I do know that there was research that this kind of background noise is not just white noise to children; they pick up on a lot. You talked about studies where the television is on, and children may be engaged in other things, but they are very aware of and affected by something that may be disturbing.

A: There are three areas of concern with background media. One, research (Kirkorian, Pempek, Murphy, Schmidt, & Anderson, 2009) suggests that when babies and toddlers are in a room and a parent is watching adult media in the background, it does seem to interfere with their natural play and suggests that they’re having difficulty focusing. Second, they can be disturbed by the information on the screen, particularly given what’s in the news today, and adults should protect the child from that. And the third concern is the extent to which television is a background for daily life, something that’s called the constant television household. We have some developing data that suggests as many as a third of American children less than 2 years old live in households where a television set is on from morning to night, and it’s a background to daily living.

There’s some evidence from data that were collected on children in the 2000s and the late 1990s (Vandewater, Bickham, Lee, Cummings, Wartella, & Rideout, 2005) that suggested that children who grow up in constant television households may have lower literacy scores and may not be reading as early as children who do not grow up in households where television is on in the background.

Q: In those households, nobody’s talking to each other. If you’re feeding your baby and you’re watching the news at the same time, chances are you’re not going to say, “Oh, did you like the taste of that?” or respond to the child. I would love you to share what is a “healthy diet” when it comes to media? When a child is 2, 3 years old, what is your recommendation?

A: The guidelines that were set out by the American Academy of Pediatrics of no more than 2 hours of screen time, even for children older than 2 years, are excellent guidelines. You certainly want them to be engaged more with people, with parents, and with objects that they can manipulate.

Q: Even if children are interacting with media, it’s basically a very passive experience. In terms of hoping to boost your child’s learning, do you think it’s important for parents to have their children engaging in some of this new media? Or do you think that the traditional ways of children learning and engaging and developing are still what parents should be focusing on?

A: I absolutely believe that they should focus on the traditional ways, particularly parents of very young babies. There’s a long tradition of parents holding their child and just talking. That’s the most important thing that a parent can do. And using daily opportunities, such as when walking through a grocery store, to talk to the child about what they see around them.
Just talking to a child is the most important platform for language development.

Q: This gets back to what you were saying about having the tube on all day long—that this can’t help but reduce interaction with adults and reduce language.

A: And for older children who are more aware, the 3 and 4-year-olds, there is an awful lot of entertainment media that has inappropriate material. It’s remarkable how—even in primetime—how much more sexually explicit comments there are, and parents have to be careful, and be aware of what they think is appropriate or not appropriate for their child.

Q: This gets back to what we were talking about earlier, about these videos and DVDs, they’re very expensive, and when it’s promising to make your baby smarter, it’s very hard for parents to resist. What are some of the things to be on the lookout for? Are there places that the parents can turn to?

A: There are online communities of parents who report how they feel about programs. There are some guidelines online. Common Sense Media has some recommendations for parents and ways for looking at material. PBS has a parent’s guide about shows and programs that are available for preschool children, and it’s quite a wonderful parent’s guide that also suggests activities that they can engage in with a child when they watch TV. In fact, ZERO TO THREE’s Web site, and podcasts like this, are examples of support mechanisms that parents can use to guide themselves through the thicket.

Q: One of the things that you touched on that’s so critical in all of this is to follow the child’s lead. If there are things that seem to be really engaging her, but a parent are a little worried that she gets engaged to the point where they kind of lose her, I would guess that that’s a big red flag that maybe this is not something the child should be spending a lot of time with.

A: Absolutely. And some children will show that they’re frightened by some of the material, or it’s disturbing for them. Parents need to be able to assess whether they think it’s appropriate or not appropriate.

Q: If a parent of a 12-month, old, for example, said to you, “Look, I really would like to be picking videos or DVDs that are going to help in my child’s learning.” What kinds of things would you tell them to look for?

A: For 12-month-olds they’re learning language, so look for a video that is targeted for a 12-month-old that specifically labels objects and the world around the child. For example, labels objects in the natural world, such as animals, or plants, or trees, and the sounds that animals make. Parents can extend the learning and repeat it in a real-life context, for example to remind the child that this is a ball like they saw Elmo play with, or this is a dog much like the dog that they saw in the video. The parents help shape the child’s attention and can reinforce the language that is used both when they’re watching the screen or outside of the screen.
both at the point of watching and also away from the screen.

Q: When a child is 2½ or 3 years old, what are some of the things that parents should be looking for?
A: They should be showing more stories and narratives at that point, to see if the child understands the story, and ask him to repeat the story. What did he just see? Why was Dora upset about something, or why did Dora try to achieve something? What they want to see is that the child is making connections between the motivations of the characters in the story, their actions, and the consequences of their actions. It’s always appropriate, even if they’re at the dinner table, to ask the child, “What did you watch on the video today?” and, “Can you tell Mommy or Daddy or your brother or your sister the story that you saw?” And that’s one way of reinforcing the child’s understanding of narratives, and narrative is a very important basis for learning as the child gets older.

Q: There’s no question that in the field of child development, sometimes we have painted media with a very negative brush. As you pointed out, there’s a huge potential for learning, and they are going to be growing up in a world that we can’t probably even imagine…
A: Exactly. And we’ve known for a long time that the best context for young children to learn is to have caring adults and interesting objects that they interact with. Sometimes those interesting objects are the pans that they’re beating with a stick. But there is good evidence that media can also be these interesting objects. And to the extent that parents engage in media use with their young children, that’s the best context for learning.

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Dr. Wartella currently serves on the Board of the World Summit Foundation, the Academic Advisory Board of the Children’s Advertising Review Unit of the Council of Better Business Bureaus, the advisory boards of the Rudd Center on Food Marketing and Childhood Obesity at Yale University and the Center on Media and Children’s Health at Harvard University. She is a Trustee of Sesame Workshop and serves on the PBS Kids Advisory Board.

Editor’s Note: The text of this article is adapted from a podcast in the “Little Kids, Big Questions” series, which addresses some of the most common—and challenging—issues facing the parents and caregivers of infants and toddlers. The 12 podcasts in the series were all hosted by Ann Pleshette Murphy, vice president of the ZERO TO THREE Board of Directors and a former contributor to ABC’s Good Morning America Parenting Segment. The podcast series is available at www.zerotothree.org/parentingpodcasts and was made possible with the generous support of MetLife Foundation.

References


