

Baby Einstein Controversy: Professor Offers Healthy Language Learning Alternatives for Young Children

November 5 2009

(PhysOrg.com) -- Baby Einstein videos have become a staple in many American households until recently when the Walt Disney Company decided to refund the product, acknowledging that these ever-popular videos were not intended to be educational or promote better brain development among young children.

Lucia French, Ph.D., a developmental psychologist who studies language and cognitive development in young children at the University of Rochester's Margaret Warner Graduate School of [Education](#) and Human Development, says nothing contributes more to a child's early development than actual parent-child interaction. "Babies learn language best when adults spend time with them, talking about things other than behavior," explains French.

French, who does not recommend any screen time for babies, says that research on language development has shown that young children acquire language from interaction with other people. "They may acquire a few individual words from a television show or video, but to learn to use language to communicate effectively, they need to interact with other people who are interested in communicating with them," she notes.

She stresses that most children learn language readily if they are in a language-rich environment and that strong [language skills](#) are an essential foundation for eventual academic success. Parents can interact with

[infants](#) and toddlers, and there are lots of ways to do that without using a video as a prop. She offers parents the following tips to help enhance young children's language skills:

- "Housekeeping" talk (e.g. stop, come here, go to sleep, eat your food, etc.) is common language that every parent uses. All children hear about the same amount of it, but children who develop better communication skills and more vocabulary are those with parents who go beyond "housekeeping talk" to talk with the child about other things, particularly about recent experiences and plans for the near future. Exposure only to "housekeeping talk" deprives children of building two-way communication and a rich vocabulary based on conceptual experiences.
- Be positive! A lot of children hear many more negative comments than positive comments. Parents should use "extra" feel-good words and vocabulary that have affirmations in them, are responsive terms, have active listening, and have restatements of what the child says.
- Be sensitive to what your child is interested in. Research shows that when their parents play with them, children are more responsive and learn language more rapidly if the parent enters into the interaction by focusing on what the child is already playing with, rather than trying to redirect the child's interest to something else.
- Remember that children understand a lot more language than they can use themselves. Their receptive vocabulary is much larger than their productive vocabulary.
- Be alert to whether or not your baby is interested in what you have to say. Babies who aren't talking yet adjust the amount of language input they are receiving by withdrawing their attention if they don't understand what the adult is saying. The younger the child, the more the adult needs to talk about the immediate environment, familiar objects, and familiar

routines, such as bath time and lunchtime. As children grow older—12 to 18 months—they are increasingly able to understand talk about other places as well as the future and past.

- Babies and [toddlers](#) like faces, music, movement and bright colors, and while Baby Einstein videos offer some of these features, the screen time isn't going to help them learn a language. Parents should look for other non-video props and activities that tap into these interests.
- Read to your baby two to three times a day. Reading to children under 9 months does not necessarily contribute significantly to language development, but it establishes the "lap reading" positive relationship that connects the child to the reader to the book. It is really the quality of the interaction that is important from birth to about 12 months.
- Use picture books for children under 18 months, and as language develops, the amount of text can be increased. This interaction is really about talking together with a book as the focus rather than actually reading the words in the book. Many parents develop a format involving four parts: Adult getting child's attention; adult asking a question; child responding to the question; adult giving positive feedback.
- As [children](#) become older, they enjoy both simple stories and non-fiction books that help them understand the world they live in.

French, a former Spencer Fellow and Fulbright Scholar, teaches courses in child development, [language development](#), learning theory, and early childhood education at the Warner School. Her research explores the relationship between language and [cognitive development](#) during the preschool years, with emphasis on the roles of social interaction and prior knowledge. Based on her research, French has developed a science-based preschool curriculum to foster [language](#) development, learning, cognition, and school readiness. The ScienceStart! Curriculum

capitalizes on children's natural curiosity about the world around them to build the cognitive and social skills and knowledge needed for healthy development and academic success.

French is the author of *Young Children's Understanding of Relational Terms: Some Ifs, Ors, and Buts* (Springer-Verlag, 1985) and has published more than 30 articles in research journals and other articles in publications for early childhood educators.

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Citation: Baby Einstein Controversy: Professor Offers Healthy Language Learning Alternatives for Young Children (2009, November 5) retrieved 26 April 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2009-11-baby-einstein-controversy-professor-healthy.html>

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