

Associations between media viewing and language development in children under age 2 years

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Introduction

Parents and their preschoolers may be fans of the popular TV shows, *Blue's Clues*, *Barney*, and *Sesame Street*. These time-honored productions have been carefully studied for their impacts on children, and researchers have consistently found that they do have educational value for children ages 2½ to 5 years. These days, more and more TV and DVD/video programming is aimed at *younger* children, even though heavy TV viewing in the under-3 set has been associated with attention problems, and impaired reading and math skills. In light of these findings, the American Academy of Pediatrics has recommended no screen time for children under the age of 2 (see http://www.aap.org/pubed/ZZZGVL4PQ7C.htm?&sub_cat=17). At the same time, many infant videos claim that they will teach children about language, logic, and other skills...what is a parent to believe?

There is very little research specifically addressing the impacts of new media on very young children. A recent article appearing in the *Journal of Pediatrics* tested the connection between media exposure and language development in children under age 2.

Methodology

More than 1000 parents of children ages 2 to 24 months were surveyed by telephone. Several questions were asked about children's time spent interacting with adults, what types of TV or DVD/videos their child, and the amount of viewing by typical weekday or weekend. Parents completed a standard form of the Communicative Development Inventory (CDI). The study also tracked parental interaction with their children in three areas, "reading, storytelling and music" (p. 2). The research evaluated the associations between media exposure and CDI scores using multiple regression, taking into account parent-child interactions and demographics.

Main Ideas

On average, infants age 8 to 16 months were watching educational TV shows about 30 minutes a day, 15 minutes viewing baby DVDs/videos and about another 30 minutes on non-educational and grownup TV. Toddlers ages 17 to 24 months watched 70 minutes of children's educational TV, 16 minutes of baby DVDs/videos, and nearly an hour of non-educational and adult TV.

For infants 8 to 16 months, every hour per day of viewing baby DVDs/videos significantly lowered the CDI score by nearly 17 points. This was a large effect. There was no association between baby videos/DVDs and language development for toddlers, 17-24 months.

Reading once a day was associated with significant increases in the CDI score by about 7 points for babies and 12 points for toddlers; telling stories was associated with higher language scores in the older children.

According to the authors, there are several possible reasons for this connection between baby DVDs/videos. First, parents whose children are having difficulty with language may use these media to help their children, believing that videos can help their young children with language development. Second, parents who are distracted or pressed for time may rely on DVDs/videos to keep their children occupied and can't accurately report their language development.

A third possibility is that "heavy viewing of baby DVDs/videos" has a negative impact on early language development (p. 4). Possibly, videos take away time from interacting with adults, especially adults talking to infants. Baby videos "may contain limited language" and images that "do not promote vocabulary learning or...actually impede it" (p. 4). For example, baby DVDs/videos "have little dialogue, short scenes, disconnected images" (p. 4), and other images that are difficult to describe.

Although there were several limitations to this study, it did find significant associations between baby DVD/video viewing and one measure of development.

Implications for Extension Programs

Media is a prevalent part of U.S. family life, and media education can help parents choose and use media in ways that promote learning and healthy development. Extension faculty can encourage parents to read to their babies and toddlers every day and to talk to them frequently. These parent or caregiver interactions are vital not only to language and cognitive development, but to a baby's social and emotional development as well. In keeping with experts' recommendations and the results of this article, parents could forego baby DVDs/videos, at the very least for children younger than 16 months. In addition, county faculty may want to attend in-service training on children and media, if offered, in spring 2008.

Conclusion

Parents who use baby DVDs/videos often choose them because they believe they will benefit their children's brain development and education. This study found that more media use of this type was associated with lower scores on language development in infants ages 8 to 16 months. More research is needed to evaluate the risks and benefits of baby DVDs/videos and explain why they were associated with lower language scores. In the meantime, parents of infants could put aside these media in favor of more parent-child interaction.

Additional References

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