



## early education

DR CATHRINE NEILSEN-HEWETT, A LECTURER IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AT MACQUARIE UNIVERSITY, SYDNEY, ANSWERS YOUR QUESTIONS ON YOUR CHILD'S DEVELOPMENT AND EDUCATION

**Q** At 10 weeks old, my baby is fixated with the television. He loves the movement and colour. I know I'll ration it when he's older, but can it do any harm if it keeps him amused at this young age?

**A** We live in a digital age where young children are spending increasing amounts of time in front of computer and television screens. Findings from a recent study, examining links between early television exposure and development, suggest that early TV viewing can over-stimulate infants and may lead to related behavioural and concentration problems associated with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). Visual images presented on TV are typically fast-paced and presented in an often rapid and "chaotic" fashion, making it difficult for infants to focus or understand. Higher levels of television viewing among infants have also been linked with irregular sleep patterns.

While babies love movement, attractive colours, objects and music, such stimulation is best achieved through walks in the garden, reading books and by playing with you. It is OK to expose your child to some television from around age two.

When used appropriately and

in moderation, quality television and video programs can have many educational benefits such as improved word recognition, more developed language skills and number concepts. Keep in mind though that young children's television viewing needs to be limited, controlled, and most importantly, supervised.

**Q** I read recently about a trend to teach babies sign language. Could this really make any difference in helping to develop my four-month-old son's communication skills?

**A** Babies have been using "signs" or gestures for centuries. They wave for goodbye, point to let you know they want something, and lift their arms to be picked up.

Research into signing by hearing infants began in the late 1980s. The general consensus is that infants who are regularly exposed to signing at six to seven months of age can, by eight or nine months, initiate communication through the use of simple signs. When compared with non-signing infants of the same age, these infants were found to understand more words and have larger vocabularies. The potential benefits of early signing

are clear: a baby being able to express itself at a younger age than would be possible through spoken communication means the potential for lowered frustration for both you and your child.

Signing may be particularly useful for infants and toddlers with spoken language delays or other special needs such as Down syndrome. Even so, it's important to reinforce vocal gestures (like 'ma' for mum or 'ba' for book) and encourage these early forms of verbal communication.

Whether you are using signs or verbal communication, the time spent interacting with your child is what is most important in fostering language development. It is not necessary to attend courses or buy videos – simply listen to and watch your child, and build on the communication he already knows.

**Q** I was advised by a toy-shop owner to give my son, who's one, only two to three toys at a time to play with, and swap them for others every few days, or he could have trouble learning to concentrate. Is this correct?

**A** Have you been into a toy shop lately? We are truly spoilt for choice. While it is not necessary to buy your child lots of

toys, the ones he has need to be varied in terms of shape, colour, texture, design and purpose. Many of the key skills your child acquires during his first few years will take place in the context of play.

Toys can stimulate creativity, broaden the imagination, enhance concentration, promote social interaction and foster important motor skills. But too many toys can inhibit creativity and reduce concentration. If you feel your child is overwhelmed, put some toys away in a cupboard and rotate them on a weekly or fortnightly basis. Look to your child for cues as to what interests him and make sure these toys are accessible.

Provide developmentally appropriate toys, as a toy he is not yet able to understand may result in frustration, while one that he has outgrown may lead to boredom. Choose toys wisely and remember that the most important plaything your child has is you! •

### YOU CAN SEND YOUR QUESTIONS TO

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