



## 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** How important is a social life for toddlers? I've read that until the age of three children tend to play more beside each other than with each other.

**A** Relationships play an important role in fostering skills that are important for social,

THROUGH CONVERSATION  
INFANTS LEARN ABOUT  
THE RULES OF LANGUAGE

intellectual and emotional growth. Although your baby will be aware and interested in other babies and toddlers from an early age, play with peers emerges slowly during the second year as toddlers begin to smile at playmates, exchange toys, imitate one another and play alongside peers.

You can support your child's developing friendships by providing opportunities for children to be near one another and spend time together. These important interactions with friends will provide the time and space needed for the development of more sophisticated and cooperative play experiences, which are important for your child's development.

**Q** A two-year-old child I look after watches a lot of TV instead of playing with other children. I have trouble getting him to respond to me when I'm there – he seems to be in his own little world. Will he have serious social problems as he gets older?

**A** Over the past two decades there has been a rapid proliferation in television programs and videos designed to appeal to very young children. The

exact impact of these programs on the social, emotional and intellectual development of infants and toddlers is largely unknown.

Among older children we know that the effects of television viewing depends largely on program content – viewing violent cartoons has been associated with increased aggression and poor school adjustment. Viewing educational content such as Play School is associated with positive social behaviours like sharing and cooperation, lower aggression and school readiness. With the right programming, TV can be positive for your child's development.

On the other hand, a lot of TV-watching may displace other

activities, such as outdoor play or social play with friends. I typically limit my two-year-old's viewing to about 30 minutes a day, while I allow one hour of television per day for my seven-year-old.

When deciding what your toddler should view, look for programs that are child centred, using simple language as well as playful repeated images and sounds. Interactive programs like Play School, Sesame Street, Hi-5 or Blue's Clues encourage children to become actively engaged by getting them to join in with people on screen through movement and questioning.

As parents we often use television as a way to occupy our children when we need to get things done, but it is important to remember that infants and toddlers learn best when interacting with adults. So make time to co-watch with your child and discuss what they are watching, and use television programming to help your children understand new concepts and make sense of their world. Balance children's television viewing with other activities, such as playing with blocks, singing songs, reading books – and playing with you! See "What's behind children's TV?" on page 66 for more information.

**Q** I heard that having regular conversations with your kids from an early age can improve their vocabulary tenfold. Is this true and how early should we start?

**A** It's never too early to engage your infant in conversation. Through conversation infants and toddlers learn about the rules of language, as they begin to babble and repeat sounds. Babies quickly become familiar with the "turn taking" of social conversation. Make sure you allow your baby sufficient time to respond when spoken to, and remember to reward all verbal and nonverbal attempts at communication.

As you carry out daily routines or when out and about, name and describe the different things you see. Children also benefit from being sung to (with time and repetition they will begin to join in) and being read to. You can start on simple books (that incorporate rhyme and rhythm) from birth. ●

### YOU CAN SEND YOUR QUESTIONS TO

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