

## Television and Babies: What Do We REALLY Know?

By Linda Acredolo, Ph.D.

I'd like to take a moment to address the issue of TV/DVDs and babies from the point of view of a researcher very familiar with the existing literature.

As is true of many issues upon which opinions differ, the truth lies somewhere in the middle. Neither position, that all televised material is BAD, BAD, BAD or that all televised material is GOOD, GOOD, GOOD, is supported by the data. Here's what we *do* know:

### Parent-Child Interaction

First of all, the data from hundreds and hundreds of studies support the conclusion that one-on-one interaction between parents and children is critically important to all aspects of early development. *Of course*, that should be high on every parent's "to do" list.

However, one-on-one interaction with parents isn't the only way children learn important lessons. They learn through playing with toys on their own (building towers with blocks, dressing dolls, stacking rings, etc.), watching nature from the safety of a stroller, listening to and learning to sing simple songs, leafing through books on their own, playing with other children, exploring their fingers and toes, etc. In fact, a parent who constantly hovers over a child is denying that child the opportunity to discover new wonders and conquer new challenges on her own. As we point out in *Baby Hearts* and the Sign, Say and Play curriculum, data show that toddlers take more pride in tasks they have chosen and completed *themselves*.

### The AAP Policy

But what about TV and children's development? After all, the American Academy of Pediatrics has taken the strong position that children under the age of 2 shouldn't be exposed to any televised material because "too much television can negatively affect early brain development." Surely they've based this strong conclusion on a solid research foundation.

The truth, however, is that *no* convincing data yet exist to support their conclusion. Sometimes a study from the University of Washington (D. Christakis et al.) is cited as evidence, but looking at the details of the study, no serious researcher would condone drawing the AAP's conclusion. Even the recently reported research from the same laboratory of the effects of the "Baby Einstein" videos showed only a small, transitory effect on language that had disappeared by 17 months. That's hardly convincing evidence of a "negative effect on early brain development."

What many other studies have shown, in contrast, is that it's the *content* of what's watched that matters. This is true whether the outcome measures are cognitive ones (e.g., grades in school) or social/emotional ones (e.g., aggression). For example, in terms of early language specifically, data do show that watching shows that elicit participation—

like *Dora*, *Blue's Clues*, and the Baby Signs® DVDs—actually facilitates language development. So do shows that feature simple language in ways children can follow, like *Clifford* and the Baby Signs® DVDs. And, of course, when it comes to our Baby Signs® DVDs, there's also the fact (confirmed by the many emails I've received this week) that our DVDs actually teach signs on their own—which the babies then proudly teach their parents!

### **So why did the AAP state things so strongly?**

I think I know why. My hunch comes from something I heard Dr. Benjamin Spock himself say once. He said that doctors often try to *scare* their patients in order to keep them from doing extreme things, like not taking their medications long enough. He gave the example of a doctor who says to a mother, "And if you don't give your child these vitamins *every single day*, he'll develop rickets!" He continued, "That's how we make them pay attention!"

So, what I think is that the AAP is really targeting (a) parents who use TV as a babysitter, not just occasionally, but routinely for long periods of time, (b) parents who let their child watch alone, not just occasionally, but routinely for long periods of time, and (c) parents who pay no attention at all to content, not just occasionally, but routinely for long periods of time. In other words, they are trying to scare irresponsible parents into behaving responsibly. The problem is that parents who are by nature "responsible" are now being made to feel like bad parents if they use TV material at all.

### **The bottom line?**

Remember the old adage, "Everything in moderation"? Well, that seems to be the safest position on this issue, too. TV, like any other tool or toy, can be a wonderful addition to a young child's life if it's used "responsibly." That's what I truly believe, and until there's hard data showing anything to the contrary, I'm totally comfortable with that position—and with providing the best televised content for babies ever produced, the Baby Signs® DVDs.