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A Tough Day at the Nursery

Are we confusing competition with healthy child development?

When we began to think about this issue of *Our Schools/Our Selves*, I wanted to explore how our attitudes towards education (particularly how we care for and educate our very young) are affected by various marketing-driven campaigns. Readers might recall past issues of the magazine where we looked at products designed to “improve” children, the use of parental guilt as a marketing tool, the branding of our youngest members of society — often before they are even aware of their surroundings (Hello Kitty Maternity Ward¹ anyone?), and the reinforcement of social competitiveness, literally from birth (and apparently sometimes earlier).

Then I became pregnant with my daughter and quickly realized exactly how early the very young (and their parents and caregivers) were in this line of fire. And then it got personal.

It's been about five years but I remember the news clipping — a short article describing this new breed of parents intent on giving their children a “head start” in school. Something to ensure that they “hit the ground running.” The article described in great detail how one father taught his child to count.... (here's the best part) while his offspring was still *in utero*. Seems dad would poke his wife's pregnant belly once and call out “one” loudly

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enough for his child to hear (then poke twice and call out “two”), all the way up to 10. And eventually, the child would poke back in response to dad (once, twice...also all the way up to 10 times). Think of the jump this kid would have had on other infants in the delivery room who would have been preoccupied with more mundane tasks like crying or eating or sleeping. Certainly the father was bursting with pride at his foresight.

These days I find I’m kicking myself for not having kept this article (if only to see how long the marriage lasted — I would have made short work of my partner if he had persisted in turning my pregnant stomach into a classroom).

I was reminded of the apparently contagious need to create the uber-baby when I recently saw TV ads for a product promising to teach infants to read. There they were, young cherubs adorning my TV screen, barely old enough to sit up unassisted, “reading” flash cards or watching “educational DVDs” and calling out the words on demand. I was riveted. My daughter spoke early and often, but not in response to flash cards...merely to people or to her toys, and often spontaneously — not as a result of an informal test (“what does this card say, Cooper?” “Hippopotamuth!” “Good job!”).

[Http://www.yourbabycanread.com](http://www.yourbabycanread.com) bills itself as being “for kids from three months to five years old.” It’s all based on real science, of course (insert impressive multicoloured graph here): “A baby’s brain thrives on stimulation and develops at a phenomenal pace...nearly 90% during the first five years of life! The best and easiest time to learn a language is during the infant and toddler years, when the brain is creating thousands of synapses every second.” Dr. Titzer, the inventor, maintains “the current practice of starting to teach reading skills in school is too late...since a child basically has *only one natural window* for learning language — from about birth to about age four.” And more science: “Studies prove that the earlier a child learns to read, the better they perform in school and later in life....*Why should parents delay teaching a child to read* when the most natural time to learn language is during the infant and toddler years?” [Both emphases added.] When your child’s academic future is at stake, why would you indeed, Mom and Dad?

A major component of this learning system is the DVD that this comes with detailed instructions for parents who are told

that to experience “success” their child must watch the DVD for an hour a day (or 30 minutes twice a day, if some parents balk at propping their infant in front of the boob tube for extended periods of time). And it’s not as if yourbabycanread is like “ordinary” TV watching, after all — the promotional material on the website clearly differentiates: “Remember, Dr. Titzer would rather you not let your child *watch any other TV programs.*” [Emphasis added.]

I’m certainly not going to suggest that parental or caregiver interaction and communication with a child has no positive educational benefits. And I’m the last person to argue against fostering a love of reading, or of learning in general, in kids. (Although more and more I’m convinced that when we talk about a “love of learning,” what we really mean is an “acceptance for being schooled.” After all, aren’t we always learning — particularly children, for whom “what’s that?” and “why?” are their two most common questions?) But rather than reinforcing daily interaction with and basic curiosity about the world around them that’s so natural to children, it strikes me as a bit odd that so much space on yourbabycanread.com is given over to explaining how parents can more or less “overcome” their child’s interest in a variety of objects and actions in order to “help their active child focus on the videos.” Dim the lights so the child will focus on the TV, remove any other objects from sight that may “compete” for the child’s interest, and seat the child close to the screen, maybe in a highchair (or perhaps use the videos in the car while traveling). Try playing the video when parents and caregivers are busy “(on the phone, etc.) even if it is for a few minutes.” And, above all, (of course while making it as interactive and fun as possible — after all, this is about quality time), don’t give up hope if your child seems to prefer being “active” (read: uninterested) rather than watching TV: “Many people have successfully taught their babies and toddlers to read *even if their children were hyperactive*” [Emphasis added]. I find it a little unnerving how easily the “active” child becomes confused here with “hyperactive,” when it seems to me that it’s much more a question of whether or not the child prefers to play and talk and move around rather than focus on a television screen.

I don’t mean to pick on yourbabycanread. Since the Teletubbies began (what was at that point) the controversial targeting of the under-three set via TV screen over a decade ago,

other companies have followed suit. But it quickly became apparent to the manufacturers of these products that the best way to alleviate parental discomfort or guilt at propping infants in front of the television, even for the 10 minutes it takes for

mom or dad to grab a quick shower, was to reposition these kid programs as “educational.”

And it worked. The edutainment industry exploded, largely built on promises to anxious parents of turning their chil-

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dren into budding brainiacs. Baby Einstein. Brainy Baby. Baby Genius. Baby First TV. Baby TV (although the promise of brain expansion isn’t explicitly there in either of those last two titles). According to the Kaiser Foundation in the U.S., 56% of parents of young children believed baby videos were beneficial for child development — this being the most common reason parents gave for putting babies and toddlers in front of TV screens.³

What a shock it must have been for those parents when a major study found that children who watched these self-styled “educational” DVDs between seven and 16 months knew fewer words than children who did not.⁴ In March 2008, after a Federal Trade Commission ruling,⁵ Baby Einstein stopped billing its DVDs as “educational” — although the Disney-owned company couched this as a “website redesign,” not a retraction *per se*.

The complicated two-step between various citizen groups, the FTC and Baby Einstein (among others) is interesting, as is the extensive research that throws the mind-expanding benefits of “educational” DVDs and TV time for the zero-to-three set into doubt. But what I find even more interesting is how and why parents are convinced to purchase certain products and engage in certain activities to give their kids a “leg up” in the world. (For some anxious parents this process can apparently begin before birth.) It’s this “leg up” objective that I want to examine more closely.

Interesting fact: in the late 1990s and the early 2000s, hospitals in Georgia sent home every single baby with a classical music CD as a gift from Governor Zell Miller. The Governor firmly believed that Mozart and Bach promoted intellectual develop-

ment and brain growth in the very young — possibly leading to improved performances in math, engineering...“even chess.”⁶

Zell’s not alone in this belief of the near-magical, synapses-forging abilities of classical music. Baby Einstein’s Baby Mozart special edition DVD is one of the company’s most popular to date — one that ended up in a gift basket to us when my daughter was born. It’s become a pervasive factoid — classical music will make your child smarter. “Get her listening to those Baby Einstein CDs,” I overheard a server advise two young parents who were dining with their 16-month old child. A character on a popular TV crime show holds headphones to her pregnant belly. “Beethoven,” she explains to her smiling coworkers. (“I preferred Mozart,” responds her child prodigy of a colleague.) “You should teach her how to play the violin,” one salesclerk advised me, after a lively conversation with my then two-year-old daughter. “It’s good for babies.”

Again, as with reading, I’m not suggesting that introducing kids to a variety of kinds of music or musical instruments isn’t a good thing. But my point is that in this brave new world of creating the uber-baby it’s supposed to be a good thing *because it makes kids smarter* in and of itself — not as an experiential activity but rather a scientific one. It’s not that a variety of experiences are good for kids because their process of learning is ongoing or because it’s just simply fun and interesting to try new activities. It’s that a particular product (classical music, or educational DVDs, or a variety of other items) will somehow scientifically or biologically improve a child: make them smarter, more focused, and ultimately better able to compete with other kids.

This argument has also been used by both critics and advocates of basic physical activities for kids. It’s not enough for a child to run around and play because he or she wants to: advocates of play feel the need to defend the right of kids to swing from monkey bars and jump rope (known as “unstructured play”) by assuring skeptics that, far from being a “waste of time” (or simply what children do), it makes kids smarter and better able to focus on learning. (Personally, I’m inclined to consider the renaming of “dress-up” to “role playing” as part of this same “but it’s good for them! Really!” strategy.)

I’m not blaming child advocates. They are often responding to the “playing is a waste of time, there are tests to be taken and

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what do you mean preschoolers still need naps” attitude that seems to be increasingly pervasive. But this need to defend the basic activities of children — even the basic developmental stages of a child — by arguing that there’s a tangible competitive-based payoff (school readiness, better test scores, improved productivity) is indicative of something more significant that I think bears closer examination.

It’s all about preparing for the “next phase” — how womb-learning (or whatever it’s called) will give your child a jump on the other kids in the nursery; how classical music or Baby



Photo by D.M. Hamilton, ON.

Einstein will ensure your child has a leg up on other kids in day-care; how enrolling your child in a particular education summer camp (preferably one with the irreproachable name of “Oxford”) will leave you confident that your three- or four-year-old will be “ready for” kindergarten.

But what it really comes down to is the repositioning of how and what children learn, how they act and what they do as unacceptable or as something that needs to be improved upon to make them smarter and — this is key — *more competitive*. Which — perhaps you’ve noticed this too — often leads or

requires child advocates to defend children and their activities, including how they learn, what they do and how they act, from within this same paradigm. Napping, running around, even simply being and acting like an infant (who might prefer sleeping and eating and going for walks to reading flash cards) is okay *because* it makes kids better able to perform academically.

I'm all for healthy child development, lots of reading and interaction, play time and nap time and the sight of young children who repeatedly ask "why?" knowing that they'll be answered, or who will enjoy spending time figuring out how to answer their own questions — alone or with other kids and adults. I mean, who doesn't want that for all kids?

This is not a critique of learning. Far from it. It's a critique of how, increasingly, we are told we constantly need proof — tangible, measurable proof — that our kids are not just learning but rather *being schooled*. It's a critique of the manufactured need for kids to be rigorously prepared for what comes next, or suffer the consequences of being left behind in an increasingly competitive world. It's a critique of how the emotional or physical needs of children are either undercut as being an *impediment* to intellectual development and educational prowess, or are defended as being *integral* to intellectual development and educational prowess. It's a critique of how daily needs and activities of children are never allowed to be needs and activities. Rather, they're about moving on to the next developmental phase as part of a regimented schedule, driven by what will make children more competitive. Eat a good breakfast — not because you're hungry, but because it will help you learn better. Play outside — not because it's fun and the sun is shining, but because it will eliminate the "fidget factor" and you'll be better able to focus on your lessons. Get ready for naptime — not because you're sleepy, but because it will help ensure you're rested and can concentrate better in class. You get the picture.

And that's the key — whichever side of this polarized debate you find yourself on, it all comes down to what will separate your child from the rest of the herd. It's not Baby Einstein. It's more like Baby Ayn Rand.

The debates about raising healthy children are not new. But they've been intensified and in many cases subsumed by marketing campaigns promoting a slew of products to concerned and

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caring parents who genuinely want what's best for their kids, and who are terrified of compromising their future success. (Don't you want what's best for your child?) This "educational product" market certainly isn't limited to our very youngest. Scores of items for kids of all ages, miraculously, are no longer the offerings of companies targeting the multi-billion dollar market represented by kids and the people who care for them. Whether it's an exercise bike that teaches preschoolers to read and count while they burn off a few calories (you heard me),⁹ or bottled water,¹⁰ or a cell phone¹¹ or a video game,¹² these products are promoted as being educational and good for intellectual and social development.

I suspect this "guaranteed to make your child smarter" marketing strategy is possibly what's behind Little Einsteins¹³ (another Disney subsidiary) branded milk, which the company calls a "deliciously brainy beverage."¹⁴

Perhaps cynicism has gotten the better of me. But I doubt it.

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ENDNOTES

¹ "Hello Kitty invades Taiwanese maternity ward." Associated Press. Wednesday, January 21, 2009. (<http://www.cbc.ca/consumer/story/2009/01/21/kitty.html>).

² Rideout, V. (2007) *Parents, Children and Media: A Report from the Kaiser Family Foundation*. Menlo Park, CA: Kaiser Family Foundation, p. 15. (<http://pediatrics.aappublications.org/cgi/content/full/107/2/423>).

³ Zimmerman, F.J., Christakis, D.A., Meltzoff, A.N. (2007) Television and DVD/video viewing in children younger than 2 years. *Archives of Pediatric & Adolescent Medicine*. 161(5): 473-9. Quoted in Baby Scam: Marketing to Infants and Toddlers. Campaign for a Commercial-Free Childhood. (www.commercialexploitation.org).

⁴ Rebecca Smith, "TV Does Toddlers More Harm Than Good Expert Warns." *The Telegraph*. January 13, 2009. (<http://www.commercialexploitation.org/news/2009/01/tvdoestoddlers.html>).

⁵ On May 1, 2006, Campaign for a Commercial-Free Childhood (CCFC) filed a complaint with the Federal Trade Commission against Baby Einstein and Brainy Baby, two of the leading producers of videos for infants and toddlers,

for making false and deceptive claims about the educational value of their products. On June 13, CCFC added BabyFirstTV, the first television channel for infants and toddlers, to their complaint. In December, the FTC decided not to take enforceable action against Baby Einstein when the company promised to “take appropriate steps to ensure that any future advertising claims of educational and/or developmental benefit for children are adequately substantiated.” Since no substantiation exists, Disney was no longer able to claim that the videos have educational value. (<http://www.commercialexploitation.org/babyvideos/ftccomplaint.htm>).

⁶ Sara Mead. *Million Dollar Babies: Why infants can't be hardwired for success*. Education Sector. April 2007. Washington DC. (www.educationsector.org).

⁷ Ann Svensen. “Banning School Recess.” (<http://school.familyeducation.com/educational-innovation/growth-and-development/38674.html>). Retrieved March 5, 2009.

⁸ Nancy Trejos. “Preschools Break From Nap Time.” *Washington Post*, July 12, 2004.

⁹ <http://www.fisher-price.com/fp.aspx?st=10&e=smartcyclemainproduct&pid=39972>

¹⁰ “The Healthiest Beverage on Earth is Now the Coolest, Too — New Kids Only(TM) Bottled Water.” *Business Wire*. June 19 2006.

¹¹ Andrew Trotter. “Students Turn Their Cellphones On for Classroom Lessons: New Academic Uses Challenge Restrictions.” *Education Week*. January 7, 2009.

¹² Paul Korzeniewski. “Educational Video Games: Coming to a Classroom Near You?” *TechNewsWorld*. 03/27/07.

¹³ According to the company, “Disney Channel’s series for preschoolers, ‘Little Einsteins’ follows the global adventures of four friends, Leo, Annie, Quincy and June — along with their versatile and protective shuttle, Rocket, who takes them around the world and beyond in a quest to complete their mission while learning about nature, world cultures and enjoyment of the arts along the way. Designed to encourage preschoolers to learn about the world around them through exploration and discovery, the series introduces viewers to a different place or environment in each episode. Classical music and famed works of art are highlighted throughout each story, often integrated to encourage viewers to sing or hum the featured symphony or seek a detail within the master work of art to help with the mission.” “Disney & Stremicks Heritage Foods Launch New Milk Beverage Line.” Apr 17, 2008. Press release.

¹⁴ http://www.stremicksheritagefoods.com/little_einsteins.asp.