**Smart Toys Smart Babies**

Do “Smart” Toys Make Smart Babies?
By Linda Carroll, New York Times, Salt Lake Tribune November 15, 2004

Parents want their children to succeed. And these days, toy store shelves are filled with products with names such as Baby Einstein and Brainy Baby. The toy manufacturers do not come out and say it, but the clear implication is that babies who play with these toys may score some extra IQ points and get an early start on the road to an Ivy League college.

As parents are becoming more aware that children’s first three years are critical to development, companies are increasingly presenting their products as vital for intellectual growth. Child development experts, however, have their doubts. No studies exist, they point out, to show that any of the toys or videos give children an intellectual edge over playmates who stick to old-fashioned blocks and baby dolls.

While researchers have found some babies who are deprived of certain stimuli during the first years of life never completely recover, they have yet to demonstrate that increasing stimulation makes babies smarter. And some experts believe that the toys may even be detrimental to development, because they lead children to focus on memorization rather than imagination and problem-solving abilities. “Some of these toys are very entertaining and they make the child a passive observer,” said Kathleen Kiely Gouley, an assistant professor of psychiatry at the New York University Child Study Center. “You want the child to engage with the world. If the toy does everything, if it sings and beeps and shows pictures, what does the child have to do?”

For their part, the toy and children’s video manufacturers say they are simply trying to stimulate children’s interest. Research on the developing brain indicates that the first three years of a child’s life are critical. “We know that between zero to 2 or 3 years, there is rapid exponential brain growth,” said Nicholas Lange, an associate professor of psychiatry and biostatistics at Harvard. The brain continues to grow after that, but at a much slower rate, he said. Learning that takes place during those years provides a foundation for later learning. But that does not mean that the brain stops growing and developing at age 3. And while severe deprivation in the first three years can lead to lasting deficits, some children appear able to overcome even dire circumstances.

What no one knows is whether increased stimulation in early life translates into added IQ points later on. Some researchers have found hints that children can max out when it comes to the benefits of stimulation. But there is some agreement that the benefits of any specific learning toy have yet to be demonstrated. Nor do researchers know how different types of activity stack up in their effects, if any, on intelligence. “We don’t know what the effects of playing with blocks are as compared to watching a video as compared to playing with a parent,” said Doris Bergen, a professor of educational psychology at Miami University in Oxford, Ohio. Still, most experts believe that if any learning is to occur, toys must actively engage children.

**Choosing Appropriate Toys for Your Child**
By Environments Professional Group

Play is a source for knowledge and skills that cannot be taught to young children. Through play, children learn naturally as they develop mastery of themselves and their environment. Toys are the means by which children turn this ordinary activity-play-into an extraordinary adventure of living and learning. And good toys do make a difference!

**What is a good toy?** When selecting a toy for your child, ask yourself these questions about the toy:

**Is it fun?** Look for bright, bold colors and interesting designs, textures, sizes, and shapes. Watch your child’s reaction to various types of toys to see which ones intrigue him/her the most.

**Does it fit the child’s age and personality?** Take into account dexterity, maturity, and the interests of the child.

**Does the toy have more than one use?** Does it encourage creative expression? The best toys encourage many different types of play. Note that electronic toys are limited in function and do not usually engage a child in imaginative or long-term play.

**Does the toy actively involve the child?** Children learn and discover best with toys that encourage their actions and reactions. This kind of toy promotes exploration and discovery play.

**Is the toy sturdy and well-built?** Whenever possible, remove the toy from the packaging to inspect it.

**Is the toy safe?** Check for smooth edges. Pins or buttons that can be removed or swallowed or springs and pins that can catch fingers or hair are not safe. Be sure the toy is non-toxic, non-flammable, and not too noisy. Glass and brittle plastic should also be avoided.

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800 W University Parkway – 163, Orem, Utah 84058 – 801-863-8589 – 1-800-932-8220