

Just Say NO to Baby Einstein

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Einstein didn't watch videos as a baby. His genius did not come from knowing lots of information. In fact, baby Einstein spoke very little before the age of four. So much for early reading programs and preschool examinations. Einstein's genius was not based in what he knew. His genius grew from his capacity to wonder and imagine.

Every baby needs direct, intimate, playful interaction with caring human beings and the natural world. They need to touch, taste, roll around in, on and over safe three-dimensional objects, preferable the warm, soft, round bodies of mothers, fathers, grandparents, children, kittens and puppies. Babies need to see and feel the world responding to their movements. They need to experience the world respond to the movements of mom and dad. Every baby needs this direct, intimate, moving, loving experience. Each new and repeated encounter builds a corresponding neural pattern in the developing brain. The more sensual, playful, dynamic, and varied the encounters the more complex the brain becomes.

Back in the 1960's, about a decade after television was first introduced, Marshall McLuhan coined a phrase, "the medium is the message." This simple phrase holds the key to understanding how media affects the developing brain. The medium is the device that delivers the programming flashing and buzzing inside the television or computer.

In terms of brain development and contrary to most advertising, the nature and quality of interaction with the medium, the box, is the content being learned by that experience, what McLuhan called the message.

The big, huge, gigantic mistake most make is believing that the program being displayed is the message. In terms of brain development, before approximately seven years of age, the program being displayed has very little positive developmental impact. Why? Because of the brains efficiency. The brain creates new neural patterns in response to the first few encounters with any new object. Television and computer screens are no exception. Once this basic pattern is established the same neural pathways are used for each subsequent contact. It doesn't matter the image on the screen keeps changing. It is our relationship to the device remains the same. In terms of neural development *the medium is the message* means that the 6,000 hours of television (and computers) most children view before age five might as well be the same program.

Television and computer programs, sorry that includes Baby Einstein, are like junk food for the developing brain. Junk food is harmful for two reasons. It displaces nourishing whole food and, at the same time, fills the body with sugar, refined carbohydrates, fats, all sorts of chemicals, artificial coloring, flavoring and preservatives. For baby's developing brain television, DVD's and computer programs act in the same way.

Screen time displaces full spectrum, three-dimensional, moving, intimate play time with loving human being and nature. And the interaction with the box represents a sustained form of sensory deprivation at the most explosive period of brain growth and development. This sensory deprivation is easy to see when comparing real life to an electronic image of real life. Imagine riding on a horse, galloping through a stream of cool water on a warm summer day. Feel the horse's strong body pulsing beneath you. Hear its deep breaths as it plunges into the water.

Feel the cool water splashing over you. Smell the sage in the air. Experience the joy as you both indulge in this moment of pure play together. If this scene is too ambitious imagine playing with a young golden retriever.

Toss the slobbery tennis ball. See it bounce in the grass and then disappear between the golden's sharp teeth. She returns but won't give it up. You chase, grab, roll, tumble in the grass laughing and growling right along with your playmate.

Now imagine the same scenes on your big screen TV. Where is the movement? Where is the sensation, the smell of the sage? Where is the dance of your body clinging to the horse? What about the feeling of the cool water splashing or the soft grass beneath you and the retriever? Where is the relationship between you and the horse or the dog or the stream and the ball? Where is the shared ecstasy? They are not there. No matter how big the screen or fancy the speakers the sensory experience of sitting stationary in a semi darkened room, staring at flat screen is sensory deprivation compared to intimate interaction with real life. And every minute of screen time deprives your baby's brain of the full spectrum sensory and emotional nourishment it needs to build the neural patterns he or she will use for the rest of its life. The harm done by this one-two punch cannot be over stated.

Quoting from Jerry Mander's classic *The Four Arguments for the Elimination of Television*, the medium (today's television and computer imagery) impact perception in a number of disturbing ways. Direct full-spectrum experience is replaced by a two-dimensional predigested facsimile. Everyone watches the same programs so everyone experiences the same homogenized reality and implicit values. Depth of character is replaced by superficial style. The pulsing screen produces a mild form of hypnotic trance. In some cases, in Japan for example, 400 children were hospitalized with epileptic seizures from watch a Saturday morning cartoon.

Radiant screens put the mind to sleep rather than awakening and developing the capacity for wonder and imagination. Television bypasses the critical and creative thinking centers and floods the brain with evocative emotional, sexual or violent images.

The counterfeit is so real, and getting better all the time, that we tend to believe what we see on screen even when our rational mind shrugs off the images as being make-believe. The sensory and emotional centers of the brain accept every thing they register as being equally real.

Millions of dollars of public funds were poured into Sesame Street as a national preschool early reading program. After twenty years not one study demonstrated Sesame Street's effectiveness in improving reading scores. In some cases the children who spent the greatest number of hours watching Sesame Street had the lowest reading scores. All if this makes perfect since when we realize that the "medium is the message."

Let's examine Baby Einstein's advertising claims from this well researched perspective. The companies name delivers a strong message. Their products will help your baby be like Einstein. But the real baby Einstein did not grow up watching videos. He imagined and played with the real world. He did not sit passively staring and listening to a two dimensional screen for 6,000 hours by age five. The real world has depth, weigh, texture, tastes, sensations, is moving, and responsive. Interacting with a three-dimensional full-spectrum world builds the capacity to imagine, think and move in three-dimensions. The more two-dimensional passive screen time a child has the less developed will be their three-dimensional moving, imagining and thinking skills.

The company's home page begins with: "Trusted by Parents...There's a big fun-filled world out there for babies to discover. Baby Einstein helps by using music, language, nature and art in playful ways to entertain and engage little ones from birth and up. Explore our entire line of playful and interactive DVDs, videos, books, music CDs, and toys today. You'll see how Baby Einstein can help you and your little one discover the world together." Trusted by parents means, "Come on. Join the crowd. Be just like everyone else. You don't want your child to be really different do you? The neighbors baby may be smarter than yours!

The next two lines are very interesting. There is a big world out there to discover and we can help by encouraging you baby to watch our video rather than interacting with that real world. Our full line of products are specially designed to captivate (keep your baby captive, stationary, immobile) gazing at flat images of brightly colored toys, engaging gentle motion and loving puppet shows. (I didn't know electronically generated images can love!) Our videos and DVD's create a multi-sensory learning resource for parents, babies and toddlers.

Waite a minute! I thought crawling on the floor, nursing, playing peek-a-boo, snuggling with mom or dad, smooshing peas into mashed potatoes were multi-sensory learning experiences. The company goes on to say: "Our multiple award-winning video includes delightful images that feature bold patterns, colorful toys, and real world objects." If you were a baby, which would you prefer, interacting with real world objects or two dimensional images of these same objects projected on a flat screen you can't touch?

We human beings are a strange bunch. We grind up grins that appeal to a dog's extremely sensitive sense of taste and press these into shapes resembling cartoon bones. Then we package these cartoon bones in colorful boxes that appeal to human adults because dogs would never do such a thing. The same is true of babies. Babies would never buy Baby Einstein videos. They are too busy playing and learning from the real world. The real consumers of Baby Einstein products are not babies. The real target is parents and grand parents who want their little darlings to be the next Einstein. I'm quite sure that Baby Einstein products are well produced, colorful and captivating. But the *medium* is the message, not the program flashing on the screen.

I prefer squishing my peas in the mashed potatoes, thank you.

Digging Deeper...

A letter to a digital game producer...

Your essays on creativity show a deep concern for the way early patterns condition the heart and mind and how a "balanced" approach to life can open the doors of perception.

Cultural Biology is a term used to describe the way the brain interacts with the environment. The brain and environment are two sides of one dynamic, reciprocal system. Using cultural biology as a reference, one might say that there was an agrarian mind, an industrial mind, an information mind, and now a digital mind, each with its own "reality" values and language. All emerged from a deeper source which took the form of the environment that carved and constrained that original mind in order to survive.

With each shift, agrarian to industrial, or information to digital, the level of stimulation or data flow increased causing the brain/mind to adjust its thresholds of perception, constraining awareness to only the strongest signals. The softer or more subtle stimuli were filtered out before one was aware of the contact. The infinite source which becomes the content of consciousness, and therefore creativity is truncated before one is even aware of the narrowing of options. We merrily boast and swagger, a form of mass hubris, about how creative we are, while the true range of depth of perception and "real" contact with the infinite universe continues to shrink. The key is that we are completely unaware that this loss is taking place. Reality is relative to the perceptual system that creates that reality.

And sir, with all due respect, technology is the driving force behind the illusion of greater creativity while the perceptual

system and corresponding reality that defines human capacity continues to shrink.

True creativity is inherent in life itself. The original mind IS creation. We adulterate and cripple that original mind through cultural conditioning, driven more and more by technology, and then turn around and sell more technology to recapture what we have lost, a position implicit in your papers.

There is a way to nurture a developing heart/brain/mind that does not adulterate it, perhaps not completely but certainly not nearly to the extent and fashion we do today. But this depends on the adult and the adult culture becoming aware of its limitations and rediscovering its original mind, in relationship with children. Simply put, "child development is dependent on adult development." For this awakening to take place adults need living models, not simulations. Technology may be used strategically to enhance the interaction and communication between master and apprentice, but technology is not nor ever will be the Master, which is a critical mistake in our traditional use of media and technology.

The adulterated mind, never having met a living master, not a saint, but a master at being human, has no experience to recognize that the machine is not the master. They accept the counterfeit for it is all they have ever known. In a generation or two the subtle perceptions, values and behavior that renders one a master human being is not perceptible to the digital brain/mind. The digital brain does not register the frequencies that operate beneath its increasingly superficial thresholds, superficial not in terms of volume but in the depth that each contact is experienced, and the meaning derived from that depth. The master human

being appears mad, responding to energies, forms and patterns that the digital mind cannot see. The master human being is laughed at, ridiculed, seen as crazy, old fashioned or insane by the digital mind, marginalized and finally eliminated, leaving only technology as the Master.

Physicist David Bohm spent most of his life exploring at the nature of Creativity. His explorations run deep. The creativity you speak of we might call cultural creativity. David and Krishnamurti spoke of insight, the natural and free expression of real intelligence, moment by moment. Bohm states clearly that creativity without insight is not creativity at all. The challenge is to develop the capacity for insight. With this in place the use and meaning of technology take on very different meaning. Premature use and implicitly dependency on technology before this capacity for real insight is developed cripples this development while creating the illusion that great creativity is taking place.

Given your interest in creativity I recommend "David Bohm, On Creativity."

Perhaps we will meet again some day.

Michael Mendizza