

AVOIDING THE SUPERBABY SYNDROME

Giving your little genius a head start may be easier and less expensive than you've been led to believe. By being a consultant instead of an instructor, you can teach your child the most important lesson of all—how to learn.

One-year-old Rebecca lives with her affluent, college-educated parents in a neatly kept house in the suburbs. Her nursery is stocked with all the latest educational toys, and she spends much of her time in a well-equipped playpen that is placed in front of the television so she can be exposed to *Sesame Street*. Her parents each set aside 45 minutes a day for learning sessions, using flashcards to teach Rebecca to recognize numbers, letters, and objects. They have enrolled her in a professionally run playgroup three mornings a week, and in a few months, they will send her to a high-tech academy where she will receive intensive instruction in reading, writing, math, science, music, and art.

At first glance, it might appear that Rebecca's parents are helping her achieve the best possible start in life. However, 25 years of research on early learning, including extensive studies by the Harvard Preschool Project, indicate that while Rebecca's parents are well-motivated, they have been badly misguided, and they actually may be hindering their daughter's development into a bright, well-adjusted, competent preschooler.

Like most mothers and fathers, Rebecca's parents want their child to be happy and to make the most of her potential. Unfortunately, by being too structured and focusing too closely on achievements, they are obscuring what early education is all about. Whether parents focus on basic capacities such as reciting the alphabet, counting, and categorizing shapes and colors, or precocities such as playing the piano, creating poetry, or operating a computer, paying inordinate attention to

specific skills often means ignoring—or even interfering with—what is essential.

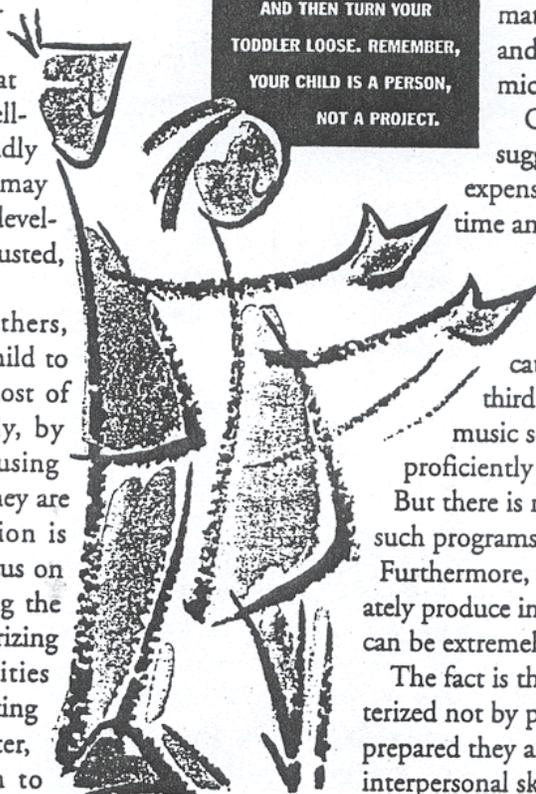
During the first years of life, children are, above all else, learning how to learn—and much of that happens when they're on their own. As children indulge their innate inclinations to explore, investigate, and experiment, they develop general skills that enable them to adapt to the ever-changing environment around them for the rest of their lives. Those children who have been encouraged to fully develop these fundamental abilities will be far better off than those whose initial experiences have been directed into relatively restricted channels—no matter how well-intentioned their instructors and no matter how impressive their early academic or artistic accomplishments.

Of course, there is plenty of evidence to suggest that if you use a variety of elaborate and expensive procedures, and if you expend enough time and energy, you can teach a young child to do just about anything. There are graduates of special intelligence institutes who can recite Shakespeare and reconstruct sophisticated mathematical models well before their third birthdays, and there are graduates of exclusive music schools who can play Vivaldi pieces quite proficiently on tiny violins while still in diapers.

But there is not a stitch of solid evidence to suggest that such programs provide any lasting educational advantages. Furthermore, while instruction of this sort may immediately produce impressive results, there are indications that it can be extremely counterproductive in the long run.

The fact is that the finest preschool students are characterized not by past accomplishments, but rather by how prepared they are to cope with the future. They also possess interpersonal skills that balance their intellectual

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abilities, thereby preventing them from becoming lonely geniuses—social cripples with high test scores and few friends. And finally, it is clear that the learning process is self-sustaining for such children. They regard educational endeavors as enjoyable challenges instead of dreadful chores to be completed in order to obtain adult approval.

Therefore, Rebecca's parents, and those inclined to follow them, might want to consider switching to some of the more productive and less stressful strategies outlined below.

Allow your child to develop a true understanding of basic concepts instead of training him to perform a meaningless repertoire of tricks. Impressive performances do not necessarily reflect impressive brainpower. After all, Roy Rogers taught Trigger to count, but you wouldn't let a horse balance your checkbook. You can teach your baby to do almost anything, but he probably won't accrue all the mental accompaniments that permit him to comprehend and appreciate the processes involved.

For example, if you teach your toddler to operate a computer, he will acquire the rigid set of skills required to perform specific tasks. But those skills may become as obsolete as knowing how to use a slide rule. Meanwhile, another child who has been permitted more flexible fun in her encounters with computers may more easily embrace whatever technology she is confronted with in the future.

It is a good idea to avoid over-controlling your child's environment and feeding him preformulated solutions. Once he is able to get around on his own, simply make your home safe and accessible, then turn him loose to satisfy his natural curiosity about everything. "Noneducational" activities will generate stores of knowledge and gradually instill universal rules for coping with a multitude of problems.

Concentrate on enhancing your child's horizontal development, and let his vertical development advance by itself.

Developmental progress can be viewed as a series of successively higher stages with each one serving as a base for the

next. If your child is prodded to move on to a higher stage too soon, he may exhibit seemingly appropriate behavior for a while, but he will probably fall back before long.

For example, during the early years, children learn to categorize objects according to similarities and differences such as shapes and colors. Once your child displays this basic capacity, it is possible—using flashcards and other devices—to get him to recognize much more intricate qualities, and he soon may be able to distinguish a Renoir from a Matisse or a fugue from a sonata. However, it will take a lot of his mental energy to keep up these tenuous schemes, and they will likely

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leave him with very little fundamental ability to categorize. Conversely, a child who is permitted to exercise simple sorting skills over and over again before moving on will be far more confident and competent when it comes to continued development.

So when your child displays the lower levels of an ability, don't take it as a sign to push ahead. Instead, make sure to provide ample opportunities to practice rudimentary skills, and wait for him to move ahead at his own pace. You will be helping to build wide and firm foundations for the more complex capacities that come later.

Encourage your child, but don't dominate his decisions. Obviously, parents of outstanding preschoolers are not idle

bystanders in the learning process. But most of the time they act as consultants rather than instructors. Instead of imposing their own agendas on their children, they set up open environments where their children make their own choices, then stand by to provide assistance and enthusiasm.

One-year-olds, for instance, often exhibit a strong inclination to browse through books. Overanxious parents may misread their infant's signals and rush out to buy the complete works of Grimm so they can start reading lessons. But at this point, the baby does not have the attention span to sit still for stories, much less the memory capacity to follow plots. On the other hand, more laid-back parents may realize that this first fascination with books is based on their infant's fondness for operating simple mechanisms. Hence, they will just let her turn the pages back and forth and perhaps introduce her to a couple of related items such as a cabinet door and the lid of a lunchbox. The result will be an educational experience that is as enjoyable as it is enriching.

Remember that your child is a person, not a project, and that there is more to life than academic excellence. Two qualities often associated with preschool students who have been pushed too far too fast are low self-esteem and poor social skills. If you value your child primarily for his accomplishments, if you only seek to educate him and don't take the time simply to enjoy him, and if you restrict his experiences to study and don't give him the opportunity to share, cooperate, and just play with other people, you just might end up with a precocious preschooler. But it's a sure bet you will produce a child whose emotional health and interpersonal relationships are at risk and who will have difficulty truly loving anyone—including himself. ☉

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