

Extract one: Parenting Inc. by Pamela Paul Last Updated: 12:01am BST 10/05/2008

Smart toys, computers, classes - parents are bombarded with products and services claiming to boost their offspring's brainpower. In this extract from her book *Parenting Inc.*, Pamela Paul discovers that children would be better off left to use their imagination

Parental anxiety about children's academic performance pervades our culture, from our obsession with the dismal state of state education (and the lunacy of private-school admissions and fees) to the books lining the walls of the parenting sections in bookshops.



The marketing message is that 'good parents' give their child every opportunity to excel

Of the spate of books intended to help parents boost their children's brain capacity, the trade magazine *Publishers Weekly* noted, 'A robust economy, demographics that have schools across the country bursting at the seams, parental anxiety about setting their offspring on the right track to succeed in a competitive world, and concern about societal threats to their children's well-being – these are some of the forces fuelling today's sizzling market for books on childcare and parents... The amount of money people are now willing to spend to help themselves be better parents has never been greater.'

Titles such as *Raise a Smarter Child* by Kindergarten and *Smart Baby*, *Clever Child: Brain-Building Games, Activities, and Ideas to Stimulate Your Baby's Mind* bombard parents with the message that it's their duty to prepare their children for the best universities before they've left the cot.

Or even earlier. Those determined to get ahead can start their foetus on the BabyPlus Prenatal Education System, which teaches 'sound lessons' in utero. BabyPlus babies allegedly reach developmental milestones earlier, have longer attention spans and greater intellectual abilities, and are readier for school.

To Lisa Jarrett, the president and founder of the Indianapolis-based company, BabyPlus is entirely logical. 'A mother who takes a vitamin while pregnant would not be accused of trying to create a body-builder,' she points out. 'We're not saying that we're promoting geniuses. We're about having mums think about long-term cognitive development.'

A pregnant mother straps on the BabyPlus device twice a day, starting at any time after her 18th week of pregnancy. Her foetus can 'listen to' lessons while she is relaxing at home. The 'curriculum' consists of 16 lessons, each a heartbeat-like thumping sound at various speeds and intervals.

While competitors advocate playing music or introducing words in utero, Jarrett, who worked as a laboratory biologist before starting BabyPlus, cautions against the expectations built into such products. The theory behind BabyPlus is that listening to the contrast between the mother's heartbeat, digestive groans, inhalations and other bodily noises and the lesson of the day, will improve the foetus's auditory discrimination.

Her proof is anecdotal, but for Jarrett the abilities of her own BabyPlused children – now 15, 13, 11 and three – provide ample evidence. 'My children tended to nurse very readily, right after delivery. They were calm, happy infants,' she tells me. 'Of course, that's sort of subjective. But most BabyPlus parents say the same thing. I really believe that I have strengthened their long-term cognitive ability.'

Explaining the product's promise to prospective customers has been a challenge, though Jarrett says it has grown easier over time. 'Independently, without any reference to our product, almost all developmental specialists are saying that the key to brain development is prenatal to three, not just birth to three.' Yet no research shows auditory discrimination lessons in utero improve cognitive skills. No matter. In business since 1998, BabyPlus is growing by 15-25 per cent each year, and in 2006 sold about 8,000 devices in 60 countries.

The infant, toddler and preschool toy industry in America spends \$221 million a year sending such messages to parents, and for good reason. 'More than 30 per cent of babies born in the US are to affluent mums aged 25-plus, who consider education a number-one priority for their children,' Reyne Rice of the Toy Industry Association says. These families 'are willing to do whatever it takes to give their children a head start in life'.

The latest toys for children are dubbed 'smart toys' – not just because they are claimed to boost a child's cognitive development, but because they contain technological enhancements that enable a child to form 'dynamic, emotional relationships'. Smart toys incorporate microchips, voice recognition and wireless capability so that toy and child can spend 'quality time' together. Perhaps the first and most influential smart toy was *Tickle Me Elmo*, a soft toy that burst into laughter when tickled on its belly. Launched in 1996, *Tickle Me Elmo* generated more than \$22 million in revenue during its first Christmas.