

15 Teacher

# DO YOU REALLY WANT A SUPERBABY?

It's only natural to want your child to get a head start on learning. But if you push too far too fast, you might actually make it *harder* for him to achieve. BY T. BERRY BRAZELTON, M.D.



**R**ecently, I saw a brochure from a firm in California that announced to new parents: "If you invest \$60 a month in our educational products, we will guarantee your baby a 10-point gain in his or her I.Q. by the time he or she enters first grade!" In other words, for \$4,320, parents could anticipate that six years later, their child would achieve a meaningless 10-point gain on an intelligence test, which has 16 points of testing error! But parents could also feel that they were doing everything possible to help their child prepare for the inevitable competition in school. The company promised materials that would teach the child to write his name by the age of 18 months, to write a letter to Grandma by the age of 2 and to read anything by 3 years old. What new parents wouldn't welcome such a program—*unless* they were aware that it could put unnecessary pressure on their child?

One of the reasons that early-learning offers hold such appeal these days is that parents are acutely aware of the competition their children will face in later years. They feel pressure is required to ensure a successful life and career. And when an answer to this need comes in the mail, it's hard to resist.

Fueling this trend toward early education is the recent awareness that babies have marvelous capacities to make choices and to learn quickly. Ten years ago, parents didn't know that newborn babies make choices—for female

versus male voices at birth, for their mother's breast smells versus another mother's by seven days, for their mother's face by two weeks and for their father's face by three weeks. What rich soil to plant with early-learning patterns!

In addition, parents hear that there are increasingly popular schools of education that advocate training 2- and 3-year-olds to read, do arithmetic, speak foreign languages and play musical instruments. At least one institution in

Philadelphia, originally dedicated to teaching impaired children, has generalized its techniques to include early training of normal children. It points to remarkable successes by toddlers in a range of scholastic achievements.

It's true that babies can be taught to perform earlier if parents' attention is focused on just one line of development. Psychologist Philip Zelazo, when he was at Harvard, proved that motor stimulation by parents in the first months of a baby's life produced significant gain in reaching patterns as well as sitting and walking during the first year. Babies who were practiced, he showed, walked earlier than those who were not practiced. And at Yale in the early 1960's, psychologist O.K. Moore advocated teaching toddlers to read and write.

In scholastically oriented Cambridge, Massachusetts, many of the families in my practice were excited by Moore's suggestions. Using powerful techniques of encouragement for an average of two to three hours a day, they were able to get their 3-year-olds to read. One little girl's mother told me: "She loves to read. As long as I'm there to encourage her she can read a whole page from the Bible without getting tired." When I observed this child's "reading skills" I noticed that indeed she could read—but she read in a flat, rather lifeless way and stopped after every other word for approval from her parent. She certainly was proud when she finished her reading exercises, but she was also emotionally drained.

By the age of 4, prodigies such as this little girl could read from encyclopedias. They didn't seem to comprehend the words they read, but they could read ahead of their classmates, and they easily became the teacher's pets. But in second grade, this ability to read was

## THE RIGHT WAY TO HELP YOUR CHILD LEARN

As a parent, your most important role is to nurture and support your child's excitement in learning *for himself*. Rather than teaching him all the time or making him self-conscious by insisting he show off what he knows, learn to read the signs coming from him that show he is ready to take on a new task. To gauge how well your child is learning, ask yourself:

- Does he look excited or tense when he's learning something new?
- Does he constantly look to me for reassurance that he's "doing it right"?
- Is he seeking new ideas independently, or must I provide each new step?
- Is he creative in working out problems or easily frustrated and dependent on me to give him answers?
- Are the tasks he performs appropriate to his age, or are they ahead of his stage of development?
- Does he get along with children his own age, or do other children shy away from him?

If you can watch for the things your child wants to learn, then join in by encouraging him to master them, you will help him build the confidence he'll need to accept challenges and learn new skills throughout his life.

Contributing editor T. Berry Brazelton, M.D., is associate professor of pediatrics at Harvard Medical School and chief of the Child Development Unit at the Boston Children's Hospital Medical Center. He is the author of *Infants and Mothers*, *Toddlers and Parents*, *On Becoming a Family*, *To Listen to a Child* and *Working and Caring*.

## DO YOU REALLY WANT A SUPERBABY (FROM PAGE 74)

longer so precocious, for the other children were rapidly catching up. By third grade, the others had caught up, and a surprising phenomenon began to appear: The early readers were not learning new, flexible techniques for reading or other learning skills. They seemed to be "stuck" in that rather flat, lifeless way of reading and of learning in general.

Not only were they unexcited about learning, but as they fell behind their classmates, they also lost the teacher's approval. That proved disastrous, for they had come to depend on adult approval for their self-confidence. When they lost it, they were left without any way of fueling themselves for future learning. They fell behind in school and began to have emotional problems. A few seemed to pull themselves together and caught up with their classmates, but many needed therapy to get out of their slump. It seemed to me that in early childhood they had become accustomed to being "special" to adults, and when they lost their "star status," they were in trouble.

Another negative aspect of teaching young children advanced skills that seemed to me even more serious was that the patterns that had served those children in early learning did not adapt well to later learning. The earlier patterns were too rigid to bend to the growing demands that inevitably were placed on them. The flat, lifeless voices in early childhood predicted a lack of inner excitement later. As we began to see the results of these early teaching methods in Cambridge at the end of the 1960's, we gave them up. I doubt that any of the parents who were so caught up with early learning in those days would recommend it to new parents now.

Perhaps the greatest danger in such programs is that they're likely to be adult-oriented rather than child-oriented. All too easily parents can take away their child's inner motivation for

learning by playing to his need for approval. There are two forces that fuel a child's eagerness to learn. First, there is the inner excitement that comes from his having a goal in mind and striving to achieve it. When he finally completes the task, the excitement he feels shows in his face. Watch a child who's trying to walk. He will practice the steps day and night. He will demand that you walk him for as long as you will. When he *does* walk alone, the excitement in his face as he toddles from place to place represents the inner excitement of having achieved it *himself*. This is the essence of feeling self-competent, and it is critical to a child's developing a good self-image.

The second source of motivation comes from those around the child. As he works to achieve a new task, his parents encourage him. They help him to walk; they approve when he tries it alone; they cheer when he takes his first step. In this role, they are acting as backups to the child's own efforts. They do not take the victory away from him. He must do it himself and at his own speed, and his parents are likely to respect his inner clock for walking.

One mother I know *did* start teaching her baby to walk when the baby was just 6 weeks old. Later, she told me that her drive to have Kathy walk early stemmed from having lost a baby just before Kathy. In her unresolved grief, she saw Kathy as safe only when she was able to walk by herself. So, her mother put her in an upright swing to bounce on her feet at 6 weeks; Kathy was cruising around in a walker at 3 months and by 7 months, she was walking alone. But when she walked, she looked like a little tin soldier, locking her body into a rigid stance and jerking her arms and legs out in front of her. In this position, she couldn't stop and start again or turn around or carry anything in her hands while she was walking. She had learned

to walk early to meet her mother's needs, but the cost of such an early achievement was obvious. Not until she was 3 years old, did she finally learn to walk normally.

In the more cognitive learning areas, such as reading or writing, the difference between pressure and supportiveness is not always so clear to parents. The problem is how to tell when you are pushing too hard, and the answer is in learning to read *your child's* signals. Watch him for signs of inner excitement as he achieves each new task. Does he keep looking at you, anxious for approval? Or does he look elated about having learned something for himself?

One of the most obvious patterns you can see, even in a newborn, which exemplifies this inner excitement I speak of, occurs as a new baby comes from sleeping to waking. If he awakens too quickly, he might lose control and start crying, and in his uncontrolled crying state, he'd be unable to pay attention to the things around him.

Instead, he roots around in his crib until he sets off a reflex called the "tonic neck reflex," which looks as if he's fencing with his face, one arm and one leg extended, the other arm and leg flexed up against his body. He then uses this reflex to set off a second reflex called the "Babkin reflex," in which his head goes forward to meet his flexed arm and to mouth his hand. A third reflex of finding his thumb or fingers is followed by insertion of his thumb, and a fourth, sucking reflex. As the baby sucks successfully on the fingers he's just gotten into his mouth, he shows how proud of himself he is by looking off in the distance, ready to observe and to listen. He looks as if he's just mastered his whole world! This look of inner success becomes the goal for parents. When you see that look on your baby's face, you know a learning experience has been rewarding to him.

It's important that a baby feel this way about his achieve-

ments in all three areas of development—motor (physical skills such as walking), cognitive (mental abilities, *i.e.*, reading and writing) and social (getting along with others), and parents should know that these skills develop simultaneously. If one line of development is placed out of proportion, the child will not have a chance to learn the other two. A child who is pushed too early into learning cognitive skills may fail in his ability to cope socially with his peers.

In fact, it is probably more important for a child of 2, 3 and 4 to learn about himself and others than it is for him to prepare for school. Instead of concentrating on how well a child can read or write, add or subtract, I'd watch for signs of generosity and thoughtfulness toward other children as opposed to his being too selfish. Although the second year is naturally a self-centered one, if a child's social skills are developing properly, he should start considering others and wanting their approval by age 3 or 4.

Being precocious is not likely to make for a well-rounded child or even for one who is acceptable to his classmates. When straining so hard to master tasks that are beyond his age level, he may not have the time or emotional energy left over to care whether they like him or whether he likes them. He may become too self-centered, too self-critical and, ultimately, too emotionally upset to deal successfully with the realities of living. And that's not what caring parents would ever want for their child.

### FOR FURTHER READING

*The Hurried Child*, by David Elkind (Addison Wesley); *The First Three Years of Life*, by Burton L. White (Prentice-Hall); *Toddlers and Parents*, by T. Berry Brazelton (Addison Wesley); "Bringing Up Superbaby," *Newsweek* (March 28, 1983).

According to the author, what skills should a child develop in school prep? "what" skills exist in pushing a child to learn beyond capacity.

1. State why early learning offers hold such appeal for parents
2. What 2 forces fuel a child's eagerness to learn?
3. What signs are there to indicate whether learning is beneficial?

**DO YOU REALLY WANT A SUPERBABY? (FROM PAGE 74)**

longer so precocious, for the other children were rapidly catching up. By third grade, the others had caught up, and a surprising phenomenon began to appear: The early readers were not learning new, flexible techniques for reading or other learning skills. They seemed to be "stuck" in that rather flat, lifeless way of reading and of learning in general.

Not only were they unexcited about learning, but as they fell behind their classmates, they also lost the teacher's approval. That proved disastrous, for they had come to depend on adult approval for their self-confidence. When they lost it, they were left without any way of fueling themselves for future learning. They fell behind in school and began to have emotional problems. A few seemed to pull themselves together and caught up with their classmates, but many needed therapy to get out of their slump. It seemed to me that in early childhood they had become accustomed to being "special" to adults, and when they lost their "star status," they were in trouble.

Another negative aspect of teaching young children advanced skills that seemed to me even more serious was that the patterns that had served those children in early learning did not adapt well to later learning. The earlier patterns were too rigid to bend to the growing demands that inevitably were placed on them. The flat, lifeless voices in early childhood predicted a lack of inner excitement later. As we began to see the results of these early teaching methods in Cambridge at the end of the 1960's, we gave them up. I doubt that any of the parents who were so caught up with early learning in those days would recommend it to new parents now.

Perhaps the greatest danger in such programs is that they're likely to be adult-oriented rather than child-oriented. All too easily parents can take away their child's inner motivation for

learning by playing to his need for approval. There are two forces that fuel a child's eagerness to learn. First, there is the inner excitement that comes from his having a goal in mind and striving to achieve it. When he finally completes the task, the excitement he feels shows in his face. Watch a child who's trying to walk. He will practice the steps day and night. He will demand that you walk him for as long as you will. When he *does* walk alone, the excitement in his face as he toddles from place to place represents the inner excitement of having achieved it *himself*. This is the essence of feeling self-competent, and it is critical to a child's developing a good self-image.

The second source of motivation comes from those around the child. As he works to achieve a new task, his parents encourage him. They help him to walk; they approve when he tries it alone; they cheer when he takes his first step. In this role, they are acting as backups to the child's own efforts. They do not take the victory away from him. He must do it himself and at his own speed, and his parents are likely to respect his inner clock for walking.

One mother I know *did* start teaching her baby to walk when the baby was just 6 weeks old. Later, she told me that her drive to have Kathy walk early stemmed from having lost a baby just before Kathy. In her unresolved grief, she saw Kathy as safe only when she was able to walk by herself. So, her mother put her in an upright swing to bounce on her feet at 6 weeks; Kathy was cruising around in a walker at 3 months and by 7 months, she was walking alone. But when she walked, she looked like a little tin soldier, locking her body into a rigid stance and jerking her arms and legs out in front of her. In this position, she couldn't stop and start again or turn around or carry anything in her hands while she was walking. She had learned

to walk early to meet her mother's needs, but the cost of such an early achievement was obvious. Not until she was 3 years old, did she finally learn to walk normally.

In the more cognitive learning areas, such as reading or writing, the difference between pressure and supportiveness is not always so clear to parents. The problem is how to tell when you are pushing too hard, and the answer is in learning to read *your child's* signals. Watch him for signs of inner excitement as he achieves each new task. Does he keep looking at you, anxious for approval? Or does he look elated about having learned something for himself?

One of the most obvious patterns you can see, even in a newborn, which exemplifies this inner excitement I speak of, occurs as a new baby comes from sleeping to waking. If he awakens too quickly, he might lose control and start crying, and in his uncontrolled crying state, he'd be unable to pay attention to the things around him.

Instead, he roots around in his crib until he sets off a reflex called the "tonic neck reflex," which looks as if he's fencing with his face, one arm and one leg extended, the other arm and leg flexed up against his body. He then uses this reflex to set off a second reflex called the "Babkin reflex," in which his head goes forward to meet his flexed arm and to mouth his hand. A third reflex of finding his thumb or fingers is followed by insertion of his thumb, and a fourth, sucking reflex. As the baby sucks successfully on the fingers he's just gotten into his mouth, he shows how proud of himself he is by looking off in the distance, ready to observe and to listen. He looks as if he's just mastered his whole world! This look of inner success becomes the goal for parents. When you see that look on your baby's face, you know a learning experience has been rewarding to him.

It's important that a baby feel this way about his achieve-

ments in all three areas of development—motor (physical skills such as walking), cognitive (mental abilities, *i.e.*, reading and writing) and social (getting along with others), and parents should know that these skills develop simultaneously. If one line of development is placed out of proportion, the child will not have a chance to learn the other two. A child who is pushed too early into learning cognitive skills may fail in his ability to cope socially with his peers.

In fact, it is probably more important for a child of 2, 3 and 4 to learn about himself and others than it is for him to prepare for school. Instead of concentrating on how well a child can read or write, add or subtract, I'd watch for signs of generosity and thoughtfulness toward other children as opposed to his being too selfish. Although the second year is naturally a self-centered one, if a child's social skills are developing properly, he should start considering others and wanting their approval by age 3 or 4.

Being precocious is not likely to make for a well-rounded child or even for one who is acceptable to his classmates. When straining so hard to master tasks that are beyond his age level, he may not have the time or emotional energy left over to care whether they like him or whether he likes them. He may become too self-centered, too self-critical and, ultimately, too emotionally upset to deal successfully with the realities of living. And that's not what caring parents would ever want for their child.

**FOR FURTHER READING**

*The Hurried Child*, by David Elkind (Addison Wesley); *The First Three Years of Life*, by Burton L. White (Prentice-Hall); *Toddlers and Parents*, by T. Berry Brazelton (Addison Wesley); "Bringing Up Superbaby," *Newsweek* (March 28, 1983).

5. According to the author, what skills should a child develop in school prep?  
6. "What dangers exist in pushing a child to learn beyond his capacity?"

- 1. State why early learning offers hold such appeal for parents
- 2. What 2 forces fuel a child's eagerness to learn?
- 3. What dangers exist in pushing a child to learn beyond his capacity?

