

## To *Baby Einstein* or Not to *Baby Einstein*, That is the Question

by Jennifer Hoffman

The "TV dilemma" is becoming increasingly prominent in our house these days. With our son Charlie, now two-and-a-half, requiring more and more stimulation and attention and a new baby brother in the mix, I feel like we are constantly struggling with this issue. How much TV is too much? What kind of TV is OK? What about DVDs and video tapes? It's all very perplexing to me and, next to potty training and adjusting to the arrival of the new baby, it is the most immediate parenting issue we are dealing with as a family.

Before Charlie was born, I had other Moms (even my own sister) handing me *Baby Einstein* DVDs saying, "Plop him in the bouncy seat in front of the TV and play this tape. Trust me! He'll love it and you'll get 15 minutes of quiet time to take a shower or do whatever you want." So I did. And they were right! He must have been eight weeks old when he "watched" his first *Baby Einstein* tape. I must say, it's a bit creepy to watch these little guys fade into a trance as the soft, "Mommy" voices sing the alphabet in different languages while images of infant toys slowly move across the screen. But, I did get that shower in, didn't I?

From *Baby Einstein* we moved on to other musical DVDs like *Baby Mozart*, *Baby Bach* and *Baby Beethoven*. As Charlie grew older, we branched out into more "advanced" versions that covered subjects like animals, space, and even words and poetry in *Baby Shakespeare*. Watching these movies has been our latest battle ground. It's a source of constant negotiation:

Charlie: "Mommy? Wanna watch a movie?"  
Me: "No movies Charlie, let's play a game."  
Charlie: "And THEN we watch a movie."  
Me: "No Charlie. No more TV today."  
(Jeff comes home from work)  
Charlie: "Daddy? Wanna watch a movie?"  
Me (whispering behind Charlie's back):  
"I just said NO to him!!!"  
Jeff: "No Charlie. No movies tonight."  
Charlie (crying and hugging Jeff):  
"I wanna watch a movie!"  
Jeff: "No Charlie. We said no more movies.  
Want to play a game?"  
Charlie: "And THEN watch a movie."

You get the picture. We have this discussion at least three or four times each day until I finally break down and say, "Fine! You can watch ONE movie." Not one of my proudest Mommy moments, but it's the truth. So I ask myself, "Is this the right thing?" He sits so still like no other time during the day. It seems abnormal to be so entranced by a non-living object. At the same time, I can't deny the fact that Charlie shows signs

of learning and development that, dare I say, may be tied to his time watching TV. Could there be benefits to watching these shows? I introduce the following as evidence that this may in fact be true and that a little TV can actually be a good thing.

Charlie loves music anytime, anywhere. He sings songs all day long and has developed a love affair with our upright piano. I guess there's no way to know if his early exposure to the *Baby Einstein* tapes had anything to do with his love of music. Maybe it was the classical lullaby CDs we played in his nursery when he was a newborn. Maybe it was my constant attempt at singing lullabies to calm him. Or maybe he was just born that way. It could've been any of these things. But the fact remains; he clearly enjoys music on many levels.

The *Baby Einstein* brand is amazing. We joke in our house that it borders on brainwashing. Believe it or not, it has a more powerful influence over Charlie than Teletubbies or Barney. We first noticed this when Charlie was a newborn as we played *Baby Mozart* and *Baby Bach* CD's in the car during long trips. It was magic, instantly calming Charlie. I don't know if he recognized the music from the movies or if there was something about the music itself. As Charlie grew older, and started to demand a particular *Baby Whatever* to be played, my husband Jeff and I grew weary of the simplicity and redundancy of the music. Thankfully, Jeff had enough sense to steal the *Baby Einstein* brand by popping in a CD of the Grateful Dead and saying, "Charlie, how about we listen to "Baby Garcia?" For some reason, that seemed to satisfy Charlie. Once we discovered this little trick, we tried others. Most notably, "Baby BNL", "Baby Dean Martin" and "Baby Zeppelin" were all added into the mix. Anything was better than the pinging of xylophones and pianos! I have to believe that Charlie's interest in a variety of musical influences must be good, right? Except for the fact that now I have to listen to Led Zeppelin occasionally. Trust me; it's the lesser of many evils.

Charlie can spot a *Baby Einstein* book from a mile away. He has chosen several of them himself while I shopped for something a bit more, shall we say, creative???. But Charlie will have none of it. We now have a full library of *Baby Einstein* books on shapes, colors, counting, animals, rhyming and more. Don't get me wrong, he loves books and we have bin after bin full of every well-known children's book. However, given the choice of buying a new book, he tends to go for the old "B.E." favorites. A love of books and reading can't be a bad thing, right?

A few months ago I came home to find my Mother and Charlie playing with *Baby Einstein* flash cards. My Mother explained that Charlie spotted them in the store and specifically asked for them. Like the books, he recognized the logo instantly. Being the loving Grandma that she is, of course, she bought them for him. There isn't a day that goes by where he doesn't ask to play

with the flash cards. We lay them out on the floor and then ask him to find cards that begin with a particular letter or meet other criteria like "food that is green." Charlie LOVES this game, almost as much as he loves music, reading books and watching "movies." The other day, he walked over to the refrigerator and said, "C-O-W spells cow." I looked and sure enough, cow was spelled on the refrigerator in letter magnets. Coincidence? Who knows. He may have made this connection through other means but this is the way it happened. I can't tell you the ridicule I endured from my playgroup friends when I told them this story. My friend Beth said, (sort of jokingly) "Wait a minute! Flash cards were not a pre-approved playgroup toy!" I tried to explain that Charlie asked for the cards and demands that I "play flash cards" with him on a regular basis but I don't think they believed me.

At the end of the day I believe that the amount or type of TV our children watch is specific to our children's unique personalities and needs. We've continued to grow our *Baby Einstein* collection because Charlie responds to it (and frankly, demands it!) For other kids, it may be Teletubbies, Barney or Sesame Street. And regardless of what he is watching, too much is always a bad thing in our house. His behavior seriously declines the more he watches. We try to limit his watching to brief periods in the morning as we get ready for the day's activities. Despite these efforts, it still requires constant negotiation and usually ends by watching "one more movie." I guess I should be thankful I don't have to watch a big purple dinosaur all day.

*Jen Hoffman lives in Andover with her husband Jeff, son Charlie and is eagerly awaiting the arrival of a second son, due in January. And no, his name won't be Einstein!*