

Transcript: Turning On or Tuning Out: The Influence of Media on Young Children's Development Featuring Ellen Wartella, Ph.D.

Q: Hello and welcome to ZERO TO THREE 's exciting new podcast series for parents: Little Kids, Big Questions, made possible with the generous support of MetLife Foundation. ZERO TO THREE is a national nonprofit organization devoted to the health and development of babies, toddlers and their families.

I'm Annie Pleshette Murphy, a ZERO TO THREE board member, and the host of this series, which will showcase interviews with leading child development experts on the issues most pressing to parents today, based on findings from a recent parent survey ZERO TO THREE conducted also with support from MetLife Foundation.

I am pleased to welcome Dr. Ellen Wartella who will be joining us today to talk about young children and media—what parents need to know to make good decisions around TV and other, so-called “screens”. Ellen is professor of communications and psychology at Northwestern University. Ellen has been doing research on children and the media for over 30 years. Is that right Ellen?

A: That is correct. I was a young child when I started.

Q: Yes. And you're a trustee of Sesame Workshop, which of course has been one of the leading organizations in the whole arena of educational media for children. Ellen, I was thinking about you and thinking about your work, because I, uh, a few months ago went to my niece's baby shower, and—and one of the things that she seemed to receive, you know, a great many of were these, quote/unquote, educational videos for very, very young children and babies. I would love to start with just your thoughts on, you know, what we mean when we say something is educational, and is it true that there is such a thing as, you know, educational media?

A: Yes. You know, it's really interesting when you think about it. For the first time in—in history that infants and toddlers are spending time with objects other than with people, and with things that they can manipulate around them. And so, umm, there's been a lot of concern about the nature of these—videos and television—that—that babies, umm, are spending time with. So, what's meant by educational media? It's typically, uh, an attempt to craft a particular message for a specific age group of children that is thought to be within their ability to comprehend it and to learn something from it, usually learning language, or learning something about numbers, or recognizing something, uh, about the world around them.. Can you have educational media? Absolutely. Umm, I think the evidence

of more than 40 years of Sesame Street has demonstrated that you can develop quality educational media for preschool children. The jury is somewhat out regarding the development of educational media for children under age two, specifically for babies. Umm, although I can say that we know much more today about how babies interact with video than we knew even four or five years ago.

Q: What—what's something that you've been working on or that you're aware of that—is particularly striking in terms of how babies learn when they're—when they're watching, umm, a screen?

A: Well, one of the things we know, and parents know this really well, is that babies are engaged with medium, and, umm, that they react to the medium, umm, that their—it's not just that their eyes are glued on the screen, but they demonstrate some evidence of understanding what goes on by the way they follow the screen with their eyes, occasionally by the way they laugh, or, umm, ex—express themselves in front of the screen, and we shouldn't discount that parents observing that, umm, is information about the nature of how babies are learning from screen media. We also have done some experimental studies in controlled environments over the last five years which suggest that babies, umm, can make sense, uh, starting at around eighteen months in particular and older of what they see, and use that information to, umm, uh, solve problems.. So, there's growing evidence that babies can learn from these videos. And we probably will become even more effective in developing, quote/unquote, educational materials. When you craft them well to meet the developmental needs of a particular target age group, uh, we can demonstrate that learning occurs.

Q: Right. Well, of course, you know, like everything else out there, the—one of the big problems I think parents have is the, umm, just glut on the market, and, umm, that—that there's—there's so much out there. So, when—when parents are looking to make good choices about what they should maybe be doing, umm, in terms of watching with their children, or what kind of—umm, what kind of, umm, video to look for, or DVD to buy, maybe we—we could talk a little about what to look for and what to avoid.

A: Well, some of the things to look for is to see if the content—umm, if you believe the content will be of interest to your child. So, if your child is interested in animals, and you have a lot of books with animal sounds, then a video content that, umm, uses language to teach children about animals, or about nature was—is probably a content that they'll be

engaged by. Umm, so, that's point one. Secondly, umm, children younger than eighteen to twenty months tend not to be engaged by narrative. And so you probably want to look for narrative material for slightly older children. And by narratives I mean story-based. Although simple stories—very simple stories, umm, where it might be, umm, appropriate for that age group between about nine months and eighteen months. And by simple stories I mean just a video that shows, umm, uh, perhaps, umm, an animal walking through a field, or some—or a—or a baby—a child picking up, umm, a flower from a field. In fact we're finding that children are engaged with in these early ages are really very simple, umm, attempts to teach children language labels for objects.

Q: So, things that are very loud and have a, you know, a lot of sound—sound effects, and are very fast-moving are probably not a—

A: Not very good. Exactly. Not very good for this really young age.

Q: What about just timing—uh, the amount of time, because, you know, the American Academy of Pediatrics have basically issued a statement that children should not be spending any time in front of screens before they're, you know, two years old. Is this—do you think that's too extreme? Do you think it's unrealistic? Umm, and if so, how much TV or media should babies and toddlers be watching?

A: Well, it's certainly unrealistic when we look at evidence from things like the Kaiser Family Foundation studies, uh, which have looked at children from six months to six year and how much time they spend. And we find in that age group they're spending about an hour a day with television or videos. And even, umm, children younger than two are spending, umm, uh, about, uh, 30—35 minutes a day with video.

So, actually the—the American Academy of Pediatrics just last year revised its 1999 statement saying no TV and no screens for children under two, to advising caution with parents using screens for babies under two. And by that they mean, umm, caution in not only the amount of time that the babies are spending, 'cause we know that the best, uh, situation and context for babies to learn is to have caring adults interacting with them. And so you want to spend time with your babies, uh, interacting with them more than you want to put them in front of a screen.

And we know that parents have multiple motivations for showing, umm, babies, umm, and toddlers screen information. They think that it is going to help them. They—they observe that their children are learning—learning language or their colors or somehow interacting and engage with

the screen. Uh, sometimes they need to have, uh, time away from the baby and they want them in a safe environment, and so putting them in front of the screen is a way for the parent to do something else.

Q: I think the other thing is that I certainly see this with the very new forms of media—I think there's a certain, uh, pride that they take that the kids are using this latest technology.

A: I think you're absolutely right. And I think that's a consequence of the recognition that we live in a technologized world, what I would like to point is, there may be both positive and potentially negative long-term consequences of this, and we don't know what all of those consequence—

Q: Yeah. I mean, I think that is what is—must be so challenging in your world, which is that the minute you begin a study on one form of media's influence on children, they're—you're—you're—you're way behind where technology is, you know, currently at.

A: Especially in the last five to ten years. Uh, the—the objects have just been growing by leaps and bounds.

Q: Right. Right. And—and, as you say, they're—they're being used by even if they're not being directly marketed for children I was babysitting for a two-year-old recently, and, uh, his father came over and—and dropped him off with—and I had bought some puzzles and books and so forth, and—and he said, "Oh, that's wonderful, and—but when he gets bored, you know, here's the iPhone that I have for him, and it's loaded with these games and apps that he wants." And—umm, and I said, "Okay. Well"—and I'm thinking, "Well, I'll hold out." You know, so, two—two hours into this, uh, he says, "Computer. Computer." And he means the phone. And so I thought, "Well, okay." So, I put him on my lap and he immediately was able to, umm, tap on, uh, an application. It was Old McDonald's Farm, and it was actually very cute. Lots of animals. Lots of sounds. Umm, but I—I noted that unlike when I read him a book and he would look up at me when I made the sounds, or if—if I paused he would fill in the sound, I could not penetrate this kind of—umm, I don't know what to describe it as--it was almost as though he went into this bubble, uh, when he was working with this, umm, iPhone.

A: Concentration.

Q: The—the concentration, and—and I was a chair—suddenly I was the armchair, and I—I asked if he wanted a snack, or if he wanted something to drink, no response. And I—I have to say I found it a little bit disturbing. I—I felt like this was a kid who was kind of hypnotized by this.

A:

And I think the other thing that this makes me think of, and I would love you to talk a little about, is I think often, umm, you know, a child is hanging out in a room where the parents are watching television, and they're assuming that because the young child doesn't really understand and maybe their—their—their language development is such they're not really—they don't think they can understand what's going on, but I do know that there was research that this kind of background noise is not just white noise to children; that they pick up on a lot. You—you talked about, umm, studies where the television is on, and children may be engaged in other things, but they are very aware of and they're very, umm, affected by, uh, something on let's say the news that may be disturbing.

A: Yes. Uh, there—there have been sort of three areas that I talk about background media. One, there's some research—umm, this is work that Dan Anderson has done—done in Massachusetts, that suggests when babies are in a room and a parent is watching adult media, and it's just background, that it does seem to interfere with the babies', the toddlers', uh, playing behavior—natural play, and—and that suggests that they're having diff—difficulty focusing. So, that's been of concern. Secondly, they can be disturbed by the information, umm, on the screen, particularly given what's in the news today, which is about rioting and large noises and—and bullhorns that this can be disturbing to the child. So, even if you think it's—it's for the adults, uh, it may be of concern to the child, and you want to protect the child from that. . And—and the other concern is that, umm, the extent to which television is a background for daily life, something that's called the constant television household, and we have some data that's developing that suggests as many as a third of American children under the age of two live in households where from morning until night a television set is on, and it's a background to daily living. And there's some evidence from data that were collected on children in the 2000s and the late, uh, 1990s that suggests that children who grow up in constant television households, umm, may have, umm, lower literacy scores, and, umm, may not be reading as early as children who do not grow up in households that television is on as a background.

Q: Yeah. Nobody's talking to each other. I mean, I think that certainly the idea of having the television on during mealtime, umm, if you're feeding your baby and you're watching the news at the same time, chances are

you're not gonna say, "Oh, did you like the taste of that," and, "Oh, isn't that yummy," or, umm, responding to the—to the child. So, I—I—I think one of the things I—I would, you know, love you to share with parents is, you know, what is a kind of healthy diet for when it comes to media. When a child is two, three years old, what—what's—what is your recommendation there?

A: I think the—the—the guidelines that were set out by the A—the American Academy of Pediatrics of no more than two hours of screen time even for children older than two are excellent guidelines. When you think that the children have naps, that they're sleeping long, you certainly want them to be engaged more with people, with you, and with objects that they can manipulate.

Q: As opposed to things that just—and, you know, I think we take for granted that we're understanding that the difference between watching something on the screen, even if they're doing some interacting with it, that it's basically a very passive experience. So, umm, you know, in—in terms of, umm, hoping to boost your child's learning, is it in fact do you think important for parents to have their children engaging in some of this new media? Or do you think that the traditional ways of children learning and engaging and developing are still what parents should be focusing on?

A: I absolutely believe that they should focus on the traditional ways, particularly the new parents of very young babies. Umm, you know, there's a long tradition of—of—of, uh, parents holding, just talking to your child is the most important thing that you can do. You know, and—and using opportunities when you walk through a grocery store, the baby—talking to what you see around you. Just talking to your child is the most important, umm, platform for language development.

Q: Right. And this, again, gets back to what you were saying about having the tube on all day long, umm, that this can't help but—

A: Reduce interaction with adults. Yes.

Q: Yes. Yes. Exactly.

A: And that's not what you want.

- Q: Right. And reduce language—I mean, just—you know, you're not gonna be talking if you're also trying to listen to what is on the tube.
- A: Exactly. Exactly.
- Q: And you're—you're distracted. So, I—I think that's a very, very important point, because I do see this a lot in homes, uh, where it's just—as you said, just becomes kind of like the radio used to be just hanging out there. Umm, what about the issue—and I know this is something that you've been very concerned about and have worked on, you know, when we talk about a child sitting in front of a screen, we were talking about a child who was the proverbial couch potato at a very young age, and that's something also that I think a lot of parents are concerned about; that at very, very young ages that kids are seeing things on television and in the media that needless to say we—we never saw. And I—uh, you know, I think this gets back to the idea that if you have the news on and your child is one or two and walking around, and you don't think they understand it, but they see people crying, and they hear loud noises, that—uh, that this is something that can be very disturbing.
- A: Very disturbing. And—and older children who are more aware, so the three and four-year-olds, umm, an awful lot of entertainment media has inappropriate, uh, material. It's remarkable how even in primetime how much more sexually explicit comments there are. Umm, and—and parents have to be careful, and—and—and—and be aware of what they think is appropriate or not appropriate for their child.
- Q: Right. Right. Umm, and—and I think that, you know, again, this gets back to, you know, what we—we were talking about earlier, that—that knowing—a lot of these, umm, videos and, uh, DVDs, they're very expensive, and when it's promising to make your baby smarter, and, you know, you're gonna have a genius, it's very hard for parents to resist this. Umm, what are—what are some of the things to be on a look out? Are there places that the parents can turn to?
- A: Well, you know, there are—there are online communities of parents who report how they feel about, uh, programs. Uh, there are some guidelines online. Common Sense Media has, umm, some recommendations for parents and ways for looking at material. So, uh, Commonsensemedia.org is the place to go. Uh, PBS, the Public Broadcasting System, has a parent's guide about shows and programs

- that are available for preschool children, and it's quite a wonderful parent's guide that also suggests activities that you can engage in with your child when you watch TV.
- Q: Right. I—I have to of course say that Zero To Three's website probably as well—good information as well.
- A: In fact, Zero To Three and holding podcasts like this and in trying to provide information in—in magazine form as well as online are all examples of, umm, support mechanisms that parents can use to guide themselves through the thicket.
- Q: Well, I think those kinds of resources are wonderful. I—I think that, you know, one of the things that you touched on that's so critical in all of this is to follow your child's lead. You know, if there are things that seem to be really engaging your child, but you're a little worried that they're—that they get engaged to the point where you kind of lose them, I—I would guess that that's a big red flag that maybe this is not something the child should be spending a lot of time with.
- A: Absolutely. And some children will show that they're frightened by some of the material, umm, or it's disturbing for them. Parents need to be able to assess whether they think it's appropriate or not appropriate.
- Q: So, Ellen, let's just talk a little bit of what—about if a parent of a twelve-month-old, for example, said to you, "Look, I really would like to be picking videos or DVDs that are going to, uh, help in my child's learning. What kinds of things would you tell them to look for?"
- A: Well, for twelve-month-olds they're learning language, and any video that is targeted for a twelve-month-old that specifically labels objects and the world around the child, labels objects in the natural world, so animals, or plants, or trees, the sounds that animals make. And what parents can do then is to, umm, extend that and to repeat what the—the—the screen is saying, and to, outside of that context, remind the child that this is a ball like they saw, uh, Elmo play with, or this is a ball that they saw, or this is a dog much like the dog that they saw in the video. So, the parents could help shape the child's attention can reinforce the language that is used both when they're watching the screen or outside of the screen.

- Q: Great. So, I'm assuming that's also true if you have an eighteen-month-old, but at that point they're getting much more mobile, or they are really mobile, and, umm, is that a good time to make sure they're watching videos that get them up and moving?
- A: By eighteen months old, absolutely. What you want is to see the child engaging and interacting. Umm, uh, let's say if they're watching a television show where there's singing—the child is standing up and singing and clapping and engaging with the material in a very physical way, and the parents can help shape that again. The mother can, umm, point out what's going on in the screen, ask the child to see if they can do the same action. Can you clap your hands the way you're seeing Dora clap your hands? Or can you open the umbrella the way that you see, uh, Dora open the umbrella. And that's a way of extending the child's language and their understanding for—of a social context in which language is learned, uh, both at the point of watching and also away from the screen.
- Q: I mean, I know one parent who actually when the child was—I don't know—two or three, they started a rule which they continued until the kids were, you know, in middle school and high school that when a commercial came on that they had to get up and move around, that they actually muted the television and they did exercises during commercials, which I always thought was a really great idea.
- A: That's wonderful.
- Q: Umm, but I think, you know, when a child let's say is, umm, you know, two-and-a-half, three, what—what are some of the things then, Ellen, that parents should be looking for?
- A: By two and a half or three the extent to which children are learning about stories and narratives, and to, umm, talk the child through, uh, you should be showing more stories and narratives at that point, to see if the child understands the story, and ask them to repeat the story. What did they just see? Uh, why did—umm, did Dora—uh, why was Dora upset about something, or why did Dora try to achieve something? Here what you want to see is that the child is making connections between the motivations of the characters in the story, their actions, and the consequences of their actions. And so it's always appropriate, even if you're at the dinner table, to ask the child, "What did you watch on—on

the video today,” and, “Can you tell Mommy or Daddy or your brother or your sister the story that you saw?” And that’s one way of reinforcing the children’s understanding of narratives, and narrative is a very important basis for learning as the child gets older.

- Q: There’s no question that, umm, among the—that in the field of child development that sometimes we have just, you know, painted media with a—with a very negative, umm, brush. As you pointed out, there’s a huge potential for learning, and, look, they are going to be growing up in a world that we can’t probably even imagine,
- A: Exactly. And we’ve known for a long time that the best context for—for young children to learn is to have caring adults and interesting objects that they interact with. Sometimes those interesting objects are the pans that they’re—they’re beating off with a—with a—with a stick. But there’s no reason why—in fact, there is good evidence that media can also be these interesting objects. And to the extent that parents engage in media use with their young children, that’s the best context for learning.
- Q: Great. Great. Umm, well, thank you so much. This was, umm, an excellent conversation—so rich. It’s such an interesting field. And you were the perfect person to talk to. So, thanks so much for taking the time.
- A: My pleasure. Thank you.