

How soon is too soon to watch?

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COLIN MCCONNELL/TORONTO STAR

Taylor Kaye and six-month old daughter Jenny watch a DVD at their Toronto home. BabyFirstTV will give Jenny a 24-hour selection of programming.

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Jenny's face lights up at the first sound of the rooster's cock-a-doodle-doo. Her wide grin shows two new baby teeth poking through. She kicks her tiny feet in excitement, waves her arms and leans forward in her bouncy chair.

The rooster is just a puppet. But that doesn't matter to 6-month-old Jenny, who, with her mother Taylor Kaye, is watching these characters on a *Baby Einstein* DVD playing in her Toronto home.

TV for babies? You'd better believe it. And as of last week, Jenny will have many more viewing options, thanks to the launch of a 24-hour commercial-free channel aimed exclusively at infants and toddlers. Called BabyFirstTV, it is being offered for a free, limited trial period for subscribers of Bell ExpressVu Digital TV (channel 562) and Rogers PersonalTV (channel 233). After the promotion, the programming will cost about \$5 per month for both Bell and Rogers premium customers, although prices may vary depending on subscribers' existing packages.

Programs, with names like *Brainy Baby*, *So Smart*, *Rainbow Horse* and *Baby Songs*, feature gentle music, brightly coloured blocks and puppets, animals frolicking in the wild, and plenty of footage of real babies.

But the network, now available in 26 countries and heavily pitched as educational and interactive, is not without controversy.

The American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) recommends against letting children under age 2 watch any television until more research has been done on its effects. But clearly, there are many parents who think life without some TV is unrealistic.

Preliminary results from a major study underway by experimental psychologist Matthew Hertenstein, of DePauw University in Indiana, show the average baby is exposed to more than 500 hours of TV during the first year of life. The research project, looking at the impact of television on baby development, is expected to be completed in 2009.

A study published in May's edition of *Archives of Pediatrics and Adolescent Medicine* found that by three months of age, about 40 per cent of babies were regularly watching television, DVDs or videos. By age 2, that rose to 90 per cent.

"We were totally against it at first because you get all these mommy groups where everyone's saying 'oooh, TV, it's so bad,'" says Kaye, on maternity leave from her job as a DJ for CHUM-FM. But then she got a *Baby Einstein* DVD as a gift when Jenny was two months old. Now they have the box set. Jenny watches a few times a week for about 15 minutes.

"I explain to her all the colours, shapes and sounds and animals," says Kaye. "In life there are all sorts of ways babies learn, and as a parent you're the teacher and you need to introduce different learning styles to your baby."

Her husband, Greg Stevens, says it's a way to expose his daughter to the media world she'll grow up in. "All we're doing is holding her back if we don't."

The Canadian Pediatric Society's latest position statement is under review and doesn't address kids younger than 2.

Catherine Peirce of the Ottawa-based Media Awareness Network, a non-profit organization devoted to media literacy, says the biggest challenge is the lack of conclusive studies on babies and television. Although there has been evidence linking early and excessive TV-watching to an increase in attention disorders among kids.

"Given that information, I think erring on the side of caution is the best approach," says Peirce. "It's just not something you need to start so early."

She adds that while BabyFirstTV is commercial-free, marketers are always aiming for spinoff products even young babies will recognize.

That's one reason Tanya Johnson, a mother of six from Etobicoke, avoids television. Johnson, whose youngest kids are four months and 20 months, doesn't have cable. "I just don't think you need it to make kids smarter," she says, noting that in her busy household, there's lots of built-in live entertainment.

Mothers like Karlee Pighin of Surrey, B.C., approach TV as one of many activities to do with their kids – along with reading, playing with blocks, going to the park and being with other kids. She says it's about balance. "TV habits for each family should be based on what works for them and not necessarily what certain studies have concluded."