

Article written for MTV's 'Sticky' – January 2006

**The Impact of Technology on Children's Lives
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Once upon a time, when you were an infant, you were given a rattle to play with. You probably had a string of plastic animals stretched across your pram for you to examine and look at. If you are under 35 you may have had an 'activity centre' attached to the side of your cot that you learned quite quickly made noises if you touched it, but there were no batteries required.

Now, babies are given electronic toys at birth, giving a whole new meaning to 'born with a silver spoon in his mouth'. Baby with a mobile has arrived. Infants and children live in the world of the here and now, and love instant stimulation.

The Vtech Touch Phone allows infants to press buttons, make music, use as a phone. I've just witnessed a 10 month old baby, aping his mother, saying 'ello' into his Touch Phone held to his ear, then holding it with two hands and pressing buttons, clearly in an attempt to send a text message.

We know from studies in neuroscience that the human brain has mostly developed by 24 months. Infants and toddlers love bright clear images and music, especially repetitive tunes, and research shows that cognitive ability can be stimulated by sight and sound at this age. So in many ways technology can have a positive impact on young children.

Exploiting this, some excellent educational TV and DVD programmes have been developed, including BBC's CBeebies, Baby Einstein DVDs, and Nick Jr's Dora the Explorer and Blue's Clues. And of course for years we have had Sesame Street, one of the most original and important educational developments in the past few decades.

Viewing TV has always been contentious when it comes to young children; indeed in 1999 the American Academy of Pediatrics recommended that children under 2 should watch no TV at all. But Dr Deborah Linebager at the University of Pennsylvania has since carried out extensive research with babies and toddlers, and concludes that age appropriate programmes, watched in moderation with carers, has a positive effect on development.

The development of technology has mirrored what children like to do. Children love animals, and the introduction of Nintendogs allows children to care for their own virtual puppy, taking it to training classes, feeding it and grooming it, watch it grow, all on screen.

One of the most successful and popular toys this Christmas for 3 – 6 year olds has been Dora's Talking Kitchen. Featuring Dora the Explorer's theme of

interactivity, and language skills (language can switch to Spanish at the touch of a button), the toy has a stove, sink, range, musical radio, whirring blender and refrigerator. It also features other excitement for the budding chef, such as touch screen recipes with challenges, like 'find the tomatoes in the garden'.

Back to our mobile toting kids, Hasbro has introduced 'CHATNOW' targeted to tweens aged 8 - 12. The two-way radio communicator looks like a mobile phone, and allows kids to be in touch with their friends and family within a two mile range without paying for airtime. It enables kids to talk, text and use its digital camera. Each phone has its own seven digit 'Buddy Number' so kids can contact each other directly. Pictures and ring tones can be personalised, and the friend's picture can appear on screen when they call.

The new Firefly phone is designed to attract 8 year olds. Small and light, it has interchangeable translucent covers, a clip to attach it to a school bag, 12 ring tones, 7 screen colours and 5 animations. With just five keys (mum and dad speed call keys, a phone book list, a send call and end call, and an emergency call button on the side) it gives parents control of incoming and outgoing calls by pre-setting numbers, and pre-paid minutes can be purchased on line.

Older children of course are inspired by music, and aspire to real mobile phones, preferably without parental restrictions. The recently introduced Sony Ericsson Walkman with phone, radio and music, and Motorola's ROKR with iTunes are perfect for teenagers. And with the impact of Xbox 360, Sony's PSP and iPod Nano, children are able to be truly in a world of their own.

It is difficult to remember, but 8 or 10 years ago many children or teenagers did not have email, none had MSN, very few had mobile phones, and listening to music on the go was restricted to cumbersome walkmans and tapes. In contrast, being able to connect to friends and family instantly, and have individual entertainment on tap, gratifies today's children's need for events to happen in the here and now and with immediacy.

Clearly parents want their children to grow and develop in the best possible way, and any stimulation given at an early age must be a good thing. Equally, having the latest gadget ensures children are equipped to tackle the techno world we live in. But parents are also increasingly busy and time short, desperate sometimes for their own space, and there could be a temptation to substitute personal interaction and play with their children for the intricacies and stimulation of the technology they give them.

For a baby to understand what to do with a mobile phone might seem incredible, and clearly indicates strong observational skills of the adults around him. The impact of technology might mean though that creativity and interaction, so important in child development, have been replaced by instant stimulation, and instant entertainment. We may find that a generation born to a world of iPod

listening, PSP playing and instant messaging finds it more difficult to establish personal communication skills. Perhaps we should bring back the rattle.

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