



You are your child's first teacher



Fortunately for parents, young children are amazing students. They're so good at learning, they do it even when we don't know we are teaching them. Children learn by watching, hearing, feeling, and tasting the world around them. In a way, your home is your child's first classroom. Every waking hour, you can bet your child is learning something.

How do children do it?

Babies are the world's best copycats

Babies learn a lot by watching what you do and then trying it themselves. For example, babies love to copy your facial expressions. When you smile, babies try to smile too. If you stick your tongue out at a newborn, the baby will stick out his tongue in return. Researchers have found that babies as young as 42 minutes old will copy an adult who sticks out his tongue (Meltzoff & Moore, 1977, 1983).

As they get older, babies get even better at copying what they see people do. Before they can talk, babies may hold toy telephones to their ears just like mom or dad. If your 12-month-old child sees you brush your hair, don't be surprised when he later grabs the brush and brushes his own hair. In fact, researchers have found that 12-month-old children can remember and copy some actions they see up to four weeks later, even if they haven't had a chance to practice them in the meantime (Klein & Meltzoff, 1999).

You're not your child's only teacher

Every person your child watches might be teaching her something. Young children can watch and learn to imitate anybody they see. This includes family members, babysitters, neighbors, and even strangers. We try to make good decisions about who we invite into our homes—our child's first classroom. Yet most of us invite strangers into our homes every day. We watch these strangers when we turn on our televisions. So does your child.

Most American children watch a lot of television. On average, children under six watch three hours a day (Rideout & Hamel, 2006). Babysitters and caregivers often use television and videos as an activity to occupy children and the television frequently remains turned on during other home activities, such as mealtimes. Do children learn from watching television? And if so, what are they learning?

Copycats

Young children learn by watching you!



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Young children learn by copying you!

Our children are watching and learning from us every day. They watch how we talk, how we eat, how we react to situations, and how we relate to others.

Helpful parenting tips

- ★ Treat your home as your child's first classroom, and the people inside your home as your child's first teachers. Young children are active learners from the start!
- ★ Remember that children watch and copy the things we do. It's never too early to provide positive examples.
- ★ Think about what television brings into your home. What does your child see, and what might your child copy later?
- ★ Limit how much television your child sees and co-view television with your child when possible.
- ★ Include your child in your everyday activities whenever you can.
- ★ Be careful what you say and how you say it, because little kids will repeat everything you say and do.



For more information on parenting and early learning, or to order copies of this Spotlight, visit www.ParentingCounts.org.

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Do young children imitate what they see on television?

In an experiment to see if babies would imitate what they saw on a television monitor, Meltzoff tested 120 children, ages 14 months and 24 months. Half of the children (60) watched a 20-second video of a stranger on television playing with a new toy. The toy was made of two cubes attached by a small tube, so that it looked like a small dumbbell. On the video, the person pulled the toy apart in a special way three times, showing the children an action to copy. The other half of the children (60) was split into two groups: One group did not see any video, and the other group watched a stranger on television playing with the toy without taking it apart. The researcher investigated three questions:

1. Would the children who saw the person on the video imitate the behavior and play with the toy in the same way?
2. Would the 14-month-old children imitate the behavior even if they didn't see the toy for 24 hours?
3. What would the other children, who didn't watch anyone take the toy apart, do with the toy?

Here's what happened:

With the 24-month-old children who saw the video, 18 out of 20 (90%) took apart the toy just like the person on television. Of those who didn't see the person play with the toy, only four out of 20 (20%) took apart the toy on their own. This is a clear indication that two-year-olds can learn from watching someone on television.

With the 14-month-old children who saw the video, 13 out of 20 (65%) took apart the toy. Of those who didn't see how to play with the toy, only six out of 20 (30%) took the toy apart on their own. Although these findings aren't as strong as with the 24-month-old children, they are statistically significant and suggest that very young children can learn by watching TV.

One group of 14-month-old children did not see the toy again for 24 hours. Even with this delay, eight out of 20 (40%) remembered and imitated what they saw the adult do with the toy. Only two out of 20 (10%) took the toy apart on their own.

This research shows that children as young as 14 months old will copy some of what they see on television, even when that person is a stranger, and children two years old are even more likely to copy what they see on television.

What are young children learning from television?

In the research presented above, in just 20 seconds of watching TV, children as young as 14 months old learned how to do something new. Think of what they might see in one hour of TV. This doesn't mean that young children will copy everything they see on TV. Other research shows that if the activity is too complicated, children will not imitate it. But with more actions or small parts of complicated ones, young children can—and will—try to imitate what they see on TV. Additionally, as children get older, they get better and better at imitating what they see (Barr & Hayne, 1999).

Enjoy the amazing learning abilities your child possesses. Babies and young children are incredible copycats, learning by watching you and everything around them!

