

INSIGHTS

by Michael Grose – No. 1 parenting educator



Hothousing: more risk than reward?

It's a 'first-world problem', granted, but what are the risks of enrichment programs for very young children – and are they doing our little ones more harm than good? Karen Fontaine asks the experts.

Article contributed by Karen Fontaine



Baby ballet. Kindergym. Swim classes for eight-week-olds. Violin tuition for three-year-olds. The list is as exhaustive as the non-stop schedule of extra-curricular activities that many 21st-century kids contend with on a weekly basis.

Intent on giving their children a head start in an increasingly competitive world, many parents subscribe to the more-is-more theory – and this is commonly known as hothousing, which is attempting to accelerate the development of children lest they get “left behind”.

But a new book, *Nurturing A Healthy Mind*, by Michael C. Nagel PhD, says learning windows have a very wide gap of opportunity and there isn't any evidence to suggest that getting children to do things sooner is better.

In fact, Dr Nagel warns that trying to have children do too much too soon by performing certain tasks or producing certain results may also engulf children in undue stress beyond their limited coping abilities.

“In fact, for some children, too much too soon can lead to stress-related anxieties that actually turn off thinking processes and do more harm than good,” he says.

All of this will come as no surprise to the readers of such titles as *The Hurried Child*, *The Over-Scheduled Child* and *The Price of Privilege*, the authors of which insist children need more time to day-dream – and families need to get off the extra-curricular treadmill and relax.

In *Nurturing A Healthy Mind* (Exisle Publishing, 2012), one of the world's leading authorities on neuroscience and paediatric medicine, Professor Peter Huttenlocher of the University of Chicago's School of Medicine, suggests that overly ambitious agendas related to enrichment and teaching programs for children may lead to what can be referred to as “neurological crowding”.

Attempts at overstimulation, he warns, can lead to crowding effects and to early decreases in the size and number of brain regions in children that are largely unspecified and that may be necessary for creativity in adolescence and adulthood.

This theory rings true with Dianna Kenny, a practicing psychologist and

honorary professor of Sydney University's Faculty of Education and Social Work.

“If one part of the brain has become very richly structured in terms of the complex neurological networks that arise through intense practice at a very young age – it certainly makes sense that other parts of the brain not specifically and closely related to this skill may not develop as well as they otherwise might,” she says.

Hothousing is a topic close to the heart of Dr Kenny, who was once consulted by a mother concerned her 10-month-old daughter was developmentally delayed because she did not appear to have “any interest in or motivation to participate in her kindergarten activities”.

Describing this as “hothousing gone mad”, Dr Kenny says “at the very least, hothousing is a waste of time and money”.

At its most damaging, if hothousing programs drive children and are based on shaming for poor performance and excessive pressure, that can do quite serious damage to a child's sense of self and their self-esteem, which can spill over into the home.

“Even the UN has now recognised child's play as a human right,” she says. “We need to allow children to explore their environment in a safe way, in an unhurried way and in an unpressured way, in order for them to develop their own sense of self and to determine what it is they're interested in – and what they want to pursue.”

Hothousing: a cautionary tale

Dr Dianna Kenny, a practicing psychologist and honorary professor of Sydney University's Faculty of Education and Social Work, has worked closely with gifted musicians “who started learning instruments at three, were winning major competitions at 15 – and going into major stages of collapse by the time they were in their late teens”.

“This is because of the pressure and the anxiety and the realisation that they didn't choose what they are doing; it was chosen for them because they happened to be good at it,” Dr Kenny says. “They lose this opportunity – which is absolutely critical for long-term mental health – of finding out who they are as people.”

Dr Kenny says children “need time where they are not being regimented or directed”. And the most critical thing of all, she warns, is that children can sometimes learn that they are only valued and loved for their achievements, particularly if they have a very special skill at music or maths or athletics. If that isn't taken in the child's stride, the child starts to believe that they are only valuable for enhancing the self-esteem of the parents. It's a very easy thing for parents to do: ‘I've got a brilliant child (therefore) I must be brilliant’. That can set up a very complex dynamic in families and quite often you will find that children who have special skills in one area have very poor social skills – they don't know how to play, they don't know how to engage with their peers and they don't know how to be ordinary. These kinds of deficits have long-term consequences.”

Karen Fontaine is a Sydney-based journalist.