

Education Life

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The Super Baby

By Janet Elder



PARENTS HAVE long appreciated the Picasso-like brilliance of their own children's first finger-painting. But never before have they paid so much attention to the amateur-quality strokes of the child next door. Pressured by their peers to raise an accomplished child and propelled by a competitive life style, parents are trying to get the edge by enrolling their infants and toddlers in classes that promise to teach everything from reading to babies to French conversation to 2-year-olds. There is Gymboree for newborns, music for 1-year-olds, science and cooking for 2's, swimming, skiing and piano for children not old enough to walk. And

Janet Elder is a member of the News Special Projects staff of The Times.

often this is just the beginning. Once these children start school, they spend their after-school hours advancing from folk songs to sonatas, from the backstroke to the high-diving board. The once calming words of the family pediatrician, "He's fine. He's doing what's normal for his age," send the current generation of parents into a state of panic. "It's not enough to have an average child," said David Elkind, professor of child study at Tufts University. "Parents want to have a gifted child. They see it as a reflection of themselves." But the dizzying array of classes for the stroller set seems to be creating fewer Mozarts and Harvard graduates than parents had hoped. In fact, psychologists and pediatricians say some toddlers have "been asked to do so much they just can't keep up," said Kathy S. Katz, director of the psychology division of Georgetown University's child-development center. "They're burned out — as they get older they just won't have the drive and motivation to rise to greater and greater challenges."

Professionals say that at an age when children should be relaxed and happy, they are consumed by the pressure to

succeed and they become nervous and upright. "The schedules of some young children look more like the schedules of busy executives," said Dr. Stanley Turecki, a child and family psychiatrist as well as a physician in charge of the Difficult Child Program at Beth Israel Hospital in Manhattan. "We're creating 'Type A' tots." "The Sooner He Learns . . ." Whether their parents are satisfying their own egos, are caught up in what the neighbors are doing for their children or are genuinely confused, the result is the same. Middle-class upwardly-mobile parents are ignoring the dictates of child development and embracing the popular notion that "the sooner a child learns something the better off that child will be." For many children, the joys of an unencumbered childhood have been sacrificed to the demand for performance their parents place on them, however subtle. The world of play, once the laboratory and secret hiding place of childhood, has been snatched from some children. Often parents see play as unproductive or a waste of time.

Burnout Syndrome



At French for Tots in Manhattan, Francois Thibaut teaches the French word for a thing, or an action, and then lets the child demonstrate the word.

"It's natural for parents in a country as competitive as ours to want to be sure that a child is keeping up with the crowd," said Dr. Benjamin Spock, author of the now legendary "Baby and Child Care." "But I would want to make the point that children are learning very actively when they are playing, when they are following their own instincts. Just because we call it play doesn't mean that something infinitely important is going on." The fast track of parenting was parodied in the 1987 film "Baby Boom" with Diane Keaton. Sitting around the sandbox, clutching thick appointment books, two mothers find it nearly impossible to book a time for their children to get together — "Ben's got play group and French on Monday, Gymboree on Tuesday, computer readiness on Thursday," said one mother. "Well, Cole's got drama on Wednesday," said the second. A third mother arrives on the scene, devastated that her child didn't get into Dalton's preschool. "If she doesn't get into the right preschool," she says, "she won't get into the right kindergarten. If she doesn't get into the right kindergarten, I can forget about a good prep school and any hope of an Ivy League college. I don't understand it. Her résumé was perfect. Her references were impeccable."

Parents Feel Vulnerable

While this scene is an exaggeration, it does capture the vulnerability of anxious parents. "Parents start to get a sense that they are being left out and depriving their children," said Dr. Leonard Rappaport, a pediatrician and director of the medical diagnostic clinic at Children's Hospital in Boston. "It's especially true with very busy parents. People are feeling that if they get behind they'll never catch up. They don't want to find out four years later that all the kids who took Suzuki are doing well and everyone else can't play in the band." (The Suzuki method teaches children to play musical instruments by rote.) The current generation of parents were the first to go to college as a matter of course, a necessity rather than a luxury. For them, admission to college was nearly as accessible as high school, so they set the standards for their children one notch higher. "We're the generation that saw what can happen if you start out right," said Stacey Bogdanoff, who with her husband, Paul Neuman, owns Neuman and Bogdanoff,

a catering business in New York City, where she also teaches a cooking course to children. They have a 3-year-old son, Max.

"A lot of parents have gone to good schools and prep schools or know of these people and now they're investment bankers," she said. "We all want our kids on that track."

PROFESSIONALS say that it is not simply a desire to raise the perfect child that is driving the current generation of parents; it is also a deeply felt anxiety about the art of parenting. That is in part by the lack of extended families.

There is no experienced grandparent next door to offer matter-of-fact advice, such as "You dumped a sack of flour over your brother's head when you were young too."

Charles and Melanie Salzman had their daughter Rachel in a variety of programs before they found one that calmed their nerves without putting pressure on Rachel. Every Saturday morning, Mr. Salzman packs his 2-year-old daughter into their car and travels from their home in Fort Lee, N.J., across the George Washington Bridge to the Center for the Study and Education of the Gifted at Teachers College at Columbia University, for an hour and a half of school — for both of them.

In the class, called "Discovery for 2's," it's hard to tell who is unearthing more — the children or the parents. The 12 children have the luxury of using the materials of a nursery-school classroom — paint, clay, a water table, a dress-up corner, a castle — to lead their imaginations, while their parents have the rare opportunity to observe their children at play while a professional whispers to them, explaining the value of their child's play. No worries about Suzuki in this room. These parents are more concerned with understanding their child's behavior than advancing it.

But no matter what the setting, children who are 2 can't help being 2, and children of this age don't share. One father, slightly embarrassed that his daughter has snatched a puzzle from the hand of another child, gets reassurance.

"Don't worry about it," said Rand Jarrell, the course's instructor and a

doctoral candidate in the education of the gifted. "Children this age tend to think everything within three feet of their play area belongs to them. The ability to share is a little too advanced for kids this age."

Unlike courses designed to teach a specific skill or academic subject, this one is geared to help the children spend most of the time simply playing. Parents can join in the block-building, don the other fireman's hat or simply observe. The most demanding moment of this loosely structured course seems to come during a brief "circle time" when children and parents sing a rousing round of "The Wheels on the Bus," or hear an animated reading of "Where the Wild Things Are."

Participation in group activity is especially difficult if it is demanded at a time when a child's play had him ready to slay the dragon he'd been stalking for the last 10 minutes. Being a part of a group is something children this age are not quite ready to do.

'A Kind of Measuring Rod'

Mr. Salzman says the 10-week course has given him depth in trying to understand what is best for his daughter. "It has been very helpful, a kind of measuring rod," Mr. Salzman said. "It has been a validation that many of our instincts, much of what we were doing, is right. We're all guilty of being sheep — it's easy when you're a parent to just assume that if everyone is doing something it must be right."

The course has also given Mr. Salzman, who is involved in film production, the chance to share his daughter's school experience, something that is usually the province of mothers or baby sitters. "She'll learn to read when it's time, when she is ready," Mr. Salzman said. "Right now, I want her to be happy and have fun and enjoy being a child." Not all classes are designed to help both child and parent — at least overtly. And most do not have play on the schedule.

At French for Tots in Manhattan, Francois Thibaut teaches children how to speak French. His love of the children and enthusiasm for what he is teaching are legendary among New York parents.

As in many foreign-language programs for adults, every word spoken here by the instructor is in French. At a recent class, the children were taught the names of groceries: sugar, coffee, chocolate. The children were then asked to take a brightly

As a result of parents' desires, many youngsters play less, experts say, and learn more unhappily.

years the Better Baby Institute, in Philadelphia, has been teaching a course on "How to Multiply Your Baby's Intelligence." The course shows parents how to have their toddlers doing everything from reading to recognizing pictures of Tchaikovsky. The institute also publishes a number of books, including "How to Give



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David Elkind, who says parents see gifted children as reflection of themselves.

Your Baby Encyclopedic Knowledge," and "How to Teach Your Baby to Read," which has sold more than a million copies.

"We're persuaded that every child born at the moment of birth has a higher potential intelligence than Leonardo da Vinci ever used," Glenn Doman, the

chairman of the institute, says to parents.

The courses, books and tapes offered by the Better Baby Institute are a source of controversy among child-development experts. While most agree that it is possible to actually teach a toddler to read, they believe that, like teaching other things too soon, it is developmentally inappropriate and deprives a child of joy.

"Trying to teach 3-year-olds to read is like giving them a key to a garden that isn't grown yet," said Dr. Ames of the Gesell Institute. "They're reading the word but not understanding."

Like educators and psychologists, parents also are starting to sense that something may be wrong. The same parents whose children attend Kids in the Kitchen were part of a standing-room-only crowd at the 92d Street Y last fall to hear Dr. Elkind speak on the miseducation of young children; he is the author of the book "Miseducation: Preschoolers at Risk."

Like Dr. Elkind, some developmental experts take the position that any class, especially one with structure, is inappropriate for almost any middle-class child under 3 or 4. "It's an adult-oriented approach," said Dr. T. Berry Brazelton, author of best-selling books on child development and chief of the child-development unit at Children's Hospital in Boston. "The way children learn at that age is by play, not teaching modes. It's totally inap-

propriate for a child under 3 years of age."

Others encourage parents to proceed, but with caution. They say a parent should develop a savvy about child development and a strong sense of their child's personality and proclivities before choosing a class.

"The more informed parents are, the more successful they will be," said Lisa Wright, co-director of the center for the gifted at Teachers College. "Some children might be ready for Suzuki at a seemingly early age. It depends on the clues the child is giving you and knowing the right time to intervene and provide an opportunity."

It is equally important for parents to have flexibility in the vision they have for their child's life, because it is critical to the child's happiness. "I would encourage parents to be experimental," said Dr. Turecki, the child psychiatrist. "But at the same time, I would encourage parents to pull back if it is not going right, without thinking that either they or the child have failed. I don't believe that if you mess up in the first three years you've finished it off. You've got plenty of latitude, but look at your child intelligently."

The National Association for Education of Young Children urges parents to seek programs that are developmentally appropriate for a child's age. "Doing what is developmentally appropriate is what will make the child get the light to click," said Bar-

bara Willer, director of information services for the Washington-based organization. "It will follow then, that the child will love to make the light bulb go on, and that intrinsic motivation is what will inspire further risk-taking, discovery and learning."

How can parents tell if it's going well — whether the child is enjoying the class or just trying to please them? "You don't have to dig for trouble," Dr. Turecki said. "You'll see it in whininess, in sleeping difficulty, in a change of eating habits, in persistent stubbornness, perhaps in continued aggressive behavior."

SENSITIVITY to a child's individuality is even more critical when a child is too good and doesn't show these outward signs of frustration or discontent. This is especially true of girls, said Louise Bates Ames, associate director of the Gesell Institute of Human Development in New Haven. "Smart, good little girls do what grownups want them to do," she said. "This can lead to tremendous difficulty for the child."

Dr. Turecki treats what he calls the "goody two-shoes personality." "When they have been tracked in a direction that really was not appropriate for who they are as people, but they conformed, they grow up with a false identity," he said. They never feel real about themselves, and that can start all kinds of things. ■