WHEN DO BABIES START IMITATING BEHAVIOR?

Imitation is a powerful and efficient way to learn. Think of how much easier it is to try something new if you've seen someone else do it first!

Children can imitate very early in life. Researchers found out that if they stuck out their tongues to babies who were just a few hours old, the babies would stick out their tongues in response. If they were patient enough to wait the twenty to thirty seconds it might take for a newborn baby to figure out how to make the facial expression they were making, the researchers found that newborns can imitate adults.

Babies are natural copycats and carefully observe people around them for guidance about how to behave. Babies and toddlers are very attentive to what their caregivers do, and they will imitate negative as well as positive behavior.

Children are also very attentive to the behavior of other children and readily imitate their behavior.

CHILDREN and TELEVISION

The television is a powerful presence in many homes. Research shows that infants learn behavior from television as early as 14 months of age and that many children under six watch an average of three hours of television a day.

What are infants learning from TV? Researchers used a television monitor to show 14- and 24-month old babies a special way to play with a new toy, then observed the children actually playing with the same toy.

90% of the 24-month-old children played with the toy in the same way as the adult on the TV screen.

65% of the 14-month-old children imitated the special way of playing they had seen on the TV.

As children grow, their memory skills improve. So does their ability to imitate! In an experiment where an adult showed 12-month-old babies special ways to play with five unusual toys, half of the babies imitated adult’s play behaviors – even after a four-week delay from the time they first saw the toys.

Studies show that imitation is an important way to learn from the first days of life, and becomes even more powerful as memory capacity develops. Babies and toddlers are actively learning from the people around them and from what they see on the television.

TV is a powerful learning tool, but it can’t replace the care and interactions that children need from you.

Help children select programs and watch programs with them. Before you select a TV program for children, know what the program is about. Watch TV together. Ask questions and talk about the program.

Be interactive. Dance and sing along with the TV. Encourage children to ask questions about what they see. They can talk back to the TV if they disagree!
After watching a television program, plan activities with children that relate to the theme of the program. Read books, plant seeds, draw, paint, or cook together. If the plants and animals in a program were interesting to the children, take a field trip together to the park and look for plants, birds and butterflies.

Find books that match the topics and ideas of the TV programs you watch. Read aloud to your children every day and encourage them to look at books on their own.

For more information, see the Talaris Spotlights: “Copycats” and “Baby See, Baby Do” available online at http://www.talaris.org/spotlight_copycats.htm and http://www.talaris.org/spotlight_babysee.htm