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.

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 Dr Dianna Kenny, 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.

“Just the opposite occurs,” 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.”

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.

“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 Hothousing: A Cautionary Tale, 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”.

At its most damaging, if hothousing programs drive children and are based on a belief that early performance leads to enhanced self-esteem, it 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.”

In Hothousing: A Cautionary Tale

Dr 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 kindergym activities”.

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

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Karen Fontaine is a Sydney-based journalist.