Lifelong Learners

(Part 1: Prenatal Education)

If you click on the Vision and Mission section of any good school website, there is usually some statement about making children “lifelong learners”. I wonder how many parents have interviewed the school administration and/or staff and asked them how they plan to do this. What does the term really mean? How does one achieve such a goal? When does one start training a child for “lifelong learning”?

The term usually means that a person should be learning all his/her life, not just during school years. When I asked one young lady once, “So what grade are you in?” and she proudly answered, “Oh, I have already completed my education!” I could only politely say, “Ah… “ I doubt any senior – senior citizen, that is -- attending lectures and workshops would agree that a little young ‘un could possibly have completed her education. She might have completed requirements toward a certain certificate or degree, but as to claim to have acquired all the knowledge one might possibly need in this lifetime… well, I have yet to meet such a person!

When does one start learning then? Certainly not from the start of Grade 1, nor kindergarten, nor preschool. Perhaps from the day one is born? When a baby opens his/her eyes, sees our world for the first time? But then, what to make of reports of fetal activity? How many mothers have played with their unborn babies, coaxing them to start or stop kicking?

The movement for “fetal education” started way back in China during the Han Dynasty (206 BC – 220 AD). It was believed that the pregnant mother’s behavior, speech, thoughts and actions affected the fetus and its future character. Queens especially were taught to “not tiptoe when standing, not sway or bend while sitting, not display arrogance yet act detached, not shout or scold when angry…”

Today, studies have shown that indeed the fetus is not only able to hear clearly sounds and voices, but also “see” in some uncanny way needles penetrating the womb and react fearfully (shrink away, shoot up heart rates and breathing motions) to them. Twins in their mother’s womb have been seen to touch or kiss each other and hold hands.

The effect of sounds has also been documented. A mother’s voice was shown to be particularly powerful because of its being transmitted through the body as well as through the air. Premature babies (who are, let’s face it, fetuses surviving outside the womb) exposed to Brahms’ “Lullaby” (six times a day for five minutes each) gained weight faster that babies exposed just to voice sounds.

Advices to pregnant mothers on how to educate their unborn baby through all their senses abound (no sudden loud sound, no harsh words, etc), and have even spawned commercial products, such as the “BabyPlus Prenatal Education System”, which proposes a series of sound variations on the human heart beat.

I am not advocating nor condemning fetal or prenatal education. But I clearly remember my fourth pregnancy. I was having my kitchen remodeled, and the workers started drilling that day. As the drill kicked off, the baby suddenly started not just kicking, but shaking uncontrollably, knocking wildly on my belly wall. I ran away from the work area to another section of the apartment, closing all doors on the way. I gently smoothed my belly, using soft comforting words and patting the area she was knocking on. Soon Baby quietened down. The same phenomenon repeated itself whenever, I was exposed to the loud drilling sound.

It was clear to me that loud noises did startle the baby. And it was equally clear that I was able to comfort and reassure her.

And yes, I will plead guilty to reading Shakespeare and poetry to my unborn babies, speaking to them in four languages, and playing classical music. Does it work? I cannot prove it one way or another, but as long as no one sees me doing it and calling me crazy, better be safe than sorry…!

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* [Makoto Shichida](http://www.brillbaby.com/early-learning/experts/makoto-shichida-1.php)
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