

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE  
ATTACHMENT INCLUDED

THE WALT DISNEY COMPANY DEMANDS RETRACTION FROM  
UNIVERSITY OF WASHINGTON FOR MISLEADING PRESS RELEASE

University Statement Blatantly Misrepresents Research Findings About Baby Einstein

**Burbank, Calif., August 13, 2007** – The Walt Disney Company has demanded the immediate retraction of an inflammatory and misleading University of Washington press release that misrepresented research data about Baby Einstein. While the press release asserted that viewing baby DVDs, such as Baby Einstein, would have a noticeably detrimental effect on language development, the study itself concluded by stating “The analysis presented here is not a direct test of the developmental impact of viewing baby DVDs/videos. We did not test through experimental manipulation whether viewing baby DVDs/videos has a positive or negative impact on vocabulary acquisition.”

In a letter to University President Mark Emmert, Bob Iger, President and Chief Executive Officer of The Walt Disney Company called the press release “deliberately misleading, irresponsible and derogatory” because it “blatantly misrepresented what the study was about, distorted the actual findings and conclusions, and ignored the study’s own explicit acknowledgment of its limitations and shortcomings.”

“We welcome well conceived and well executed research of all kinds, particularly involving media products and children,” Iger noted. “However, we question the credibility of a study that says watching American Idol is better for infants than no television at all.”

Iger also pointed out several shortcomings of the study. For example, while the study purports to be based on a survey of 1008 parents of children aged 2 to 24 months, after a closer examination, its critical conclusions focus on the impact of baby videos on infants eight to 16 months, which is a much smaller sample of only 384 children. Of this group, 44 percent watched no television of any kind, leaving a total of 215 infants with some television viewing-- but with no indication whatsoever as to how many of this smaller number watch any baby videos, much less Baby Einstein videos specifically, at all. The study was also based on telephone surveys, not active observation.

In addition to the retraction, Iger further demanded that the University’s clarification of the study and its findings be disseminated as widely as the original press release. A copy of the letter is attached.

- MORE -

University of Washington Inflammatory Press Release  
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The study, entitled “Associations between Media Viewing and Language Development in Children Under Age 2 Years,” was co-authored by University of Washington Dr. Dimitri Christakis and Dr. Frederick Zimmerman.

### **About The Walt Disney Company**

Walt Disney Company, together with its subsidiaries and affiliates, is a leading diversified international family entertainment and media enterprise with four business segments: media networks, parks and resorts, studio entertainment and consumer products. Disney is a Dow 30 company, had annual revenues of over \$34 billion in its most recent fiscal year, and a market capitalization of nearly \$64 billion as of July 24, 2007.

### **About The Baby Einstein Company**

The Baby Einstein Company, LLC, is the award-winning creator of the infant developmental media category. The company is famous for its best-selling *Baby Einstein* brand of videos, books, music CDs and toys specifically designed for babies and toddlers, from birth. Little Einsteins™, which debuted in 2005, is the company’s newest venture, specifically created for the preschool market. Headquartered in Glendale, CA, The Baby Einstein Company is a subsidiary of The Walt Disney Company. For more information, visit [www.babyeinstein.com](http://www.babyeinstein.com) or [www.littleeinsteins.com](http://www.littleeinsteins.com).

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August 13, 2007

Mark A. Emmert, Ph.D.  
President  
University of Washington  
301 Gerberding Hall  
Box 351230  
Seattle, Washington 98195

Re: University of Washington Press Release Concerning Study on Children's  
Language Development and Media Viewing

Dear Dr. Emmert:

On behalf of The Walt Disney Company, and our subsidiary The Baby Einstein Company LLC, I write to demand the immediate retraction and clarification of a misleading, irresponsible and derogatory press statement issued by the University of Washington on Monday, August 6, and thereafter posted on the University's website, regarding the publication of a study by three University researchers entitled "Associations Between Media Viewing and Language Development in Children Under Age 2 Years."

At the outset, let me make clear that we have no quarrel with the notion of conducting research into how infants respond to media products in general or "Baby Einstein" videos in particular. We welcome well conceived and well executed research of all kinds, particularly involving media products and children. We are always seeking to improve our products as we continue The Walt Disney Company's proud tradition of providing wholesome and enriching experiences to children and families.

Nevertheless, one may well question whether the study by Professor Zimmerman, Dr. Christakis, and Professor Meltzoff was indeed well conceived and well executed. Our assessment, based on what we have been able to learn thus far, is that its methodology is doubtful, its data seem anomalous and the inferences it posits unreliable. To state just a few points:

- The study combines very different content into a single category of "Baby Video", even though the types of videos lumped into this category vary widely. In effect, the study assumes that neither the specific content nor the manner in which it is consumed can influence the nature of the experience. The study does nothing to prove this proposition which is contradicted by other published studies of infant viewing (not even mentioned in the report) which find that the specific nature of content and the way it is consumed are vitally important.

- Applying the same misleading standards that the press release used, the study could be said to advise parents to be sure that infants watch television -- for the study finds that **not** watching television is associated with reduced vocabulary<sup>1</sup> -- but to avoid having infants watch baby videos. That is to say, watching American Idol is better for infants than no television at all. Of course, such advice is absurd.
- The study fails to account for, let alone assess, the interactive nature of products such as Baby Einstein, seemingly dismisses the importance of interactivity as a factor by assuming without proof that interaction is equally important regardless of content design, and then undermines even that unproven assumption by conceding that the study “cannot capture the quality of [parent-child] interactions, which surely vary.”
- While it is indisputable that children develop at different rates and differ in their innate abilities, there is no attempt to control for these differences which are particularly important in the sample of younger babies.
- While the press release highlights that the study is based on a survey of 1008 parents of children aged 2 to 24 months, a closer examination shows that the study based its critical conclusions about the impact of baby videos on infants 8 to 16 months on a disturbingly smaller sample of just 384 children. Of this group, 44% watched no television of any kind, leaving a total of 215 infants with some television viewing -- and with no indication whatsoever as to how many of this smaller number watch any baby videos at all.

Whether your University is comfortable associating its name with analysis of this quality is, of course, your decision. And I would not be reaching out to you if all that was at stake was a poorly done academic study. But the actions of the University have caused much more to be at stake. Wholly apart from the merits of the study, the press release issued by your University blatantly misrepresented what the study was about, distorted the actual findings and conclusions that the study purported to make, and ignored the study’s own explicit acknowledgment of its limitations and shortcomings. And even worse, the University issued the release and triggered the fully foreseeable press cycle before the study itself could be analyzed. In short, the University’s press release was grossly unfair, extremely damaging, and, to be blunt, just plain wrong in every conceivable sense.

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<sup>1</sup> Table 1 of the article states that 44 percent of the sample watched no media at all. Table 2 reports that “no media viewing” is associated with a reduction in vocabulary, a result that the authors explicitly state is statistically significant at less than .1. Although this level of significance is obviously less than the higher levels found for a few other variables, would not a parent, told that that the probability is greater than 90 percent that not watching television would reduce their child’s vocabulary, act on that information?

The press release begins as follows:

“Despite marketing claims, parents who want to give their infants a boost in learning language probably should limit the amount of time they expose their children to DVD’s and videos such as ‘Baby Einstein’ and ‘Brainy Baby’. Rather than helping babies, the over-use of such productions actually may slow down infants eight to 16 months of age when it comes to acquiring vocabulary, according to a new study by researchers at the University of Washington and Seattle Children’s Hospital Research Institute.”

There are at least three fundamental problems with these statements.

1. Contrary to the clear and deliberate impression created by the press release, the researchers did not attempt or purport to study the effect of watching “Baby Einstein” videos. So far as we can tell from the published study itself, the researchers asked parents in telephone interviews only to identify their children’s television viewing in broad categories -- one of which was “Baby DVD’s/videos” -- without specifically identifying the particular videos or video brands they had viewed. Thus, there is no way to know how much -- if any -- of the viewing reported in this general category was in fact of “Baby Einstein” videos. The study made no pretense of studying the particular impact of “Baby Einstein” video watching, the unique attributes of “Baby Einstein” videos, or the ways in which children and parents use and interact with “Baby Einstein” videos. By lumping “Baby Einstein” videos with all other “Baby DVD’s/videos” -- including many, such as “Teletubbies,” which offer a vastly different viewing experience -- the study provides absolutely no basis for making any findings or conclusions about the particular impact that viewing “Baby Einstein” videos may have on children.<sup>2</sup> Yet, in the very first sentence of the release, “Baby Einstein” videos are called out by name.
2. Contrary to the clear implication in the first sentence of the press release, the study did not evaluate the truthfulness or, indeed, address at all any “marketing claims” made by or on behalf of “Baby Einstein” videos. The study does not even seek to identify such “claims” or to consider at all whether such unidentified “claims” might conflict with the study’s findings in any fashion. There simply is no basis in the study for the press release’s gratuitous slap at Baby Einstein’s “marketing claims.”

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<sup>2</sup> The study describes “Baby DVDs/videos” in vague, generalized terms that could encompass a wide variety of products. In the case of “Baby Einstein” videos, while they do have short scenes and limited dialogue, the images, language, and music are thematically connected. For example, some videos provide an exploration of the seasons of the year, or the rooms in a typical house, in an accessible, interesting way for young children. Moreover, the programs use real-world images, which are easy to name and describe. They also label objects clearly, often using a mother’s voice to emphasize concepts or words, and use repetition to reinforce the themes. A program like “Teletubbies” -- which presumably would also fall within this category -- is completely different from “Baby Einstein.” There is no reason to presume that such different programs would have similar effects on children, but that is precisely what the study appears to presume. Certainly, the study provides no basis for distinguishing one sort of child video from another.

3. The press release bluntly states that “parents who want to give their infants a boost in learning language probably should limit the amount of time they expose their children to DVD’s and videos such as “Baby Einstein.” This is a very serious statement, one which has now been widely picked up in the press. It is also a statement that grossly misstates the study’s extremely limited findings and conclusions. While the study hypothesizes that “it is *possible* that heavy viewing of baby DVDs/videos has a deleterious effect on early language development,” the authors present this as only one of several possible alternative ways of evaluating the results; other alternatives do not involve this causal relationship. The authors go on to acknowledge, forthrightly, that “our study has several major limitations.” These include, in the authors’ own words:

- “the study’s co relational nature *precludes drawing causal inferences.*”
- “we used *only 1 developmental measure* -- language development, as defined by vocabulary.”
- “the sample is *not representative* of the general population.”

Indeed, in conclusion, the authors further acknowledge that,

“The analysis presented here is not a direct test of the developmental impact of viewing baby DVDs/videos. We did not test through experimental manipulation whether viewing baby DVDs/videos has a positive or negative impact on vocabulary acquisition.”

For the University to issue a press release making reckless charges warning parents to avoid using Baby Einstein products, and post them on its website, in the face of these clear and explicit disclaimers is totally irresponsible.

There is no question that the press release is having a broad and entirely foreseeable impact. Assuming that a press release from a well respected University would fairly reflect the substance and conclusions of the underlying study, media outlets are widely citing the study as demonstrating that use of “Baby Einstein” videos harms infants. This disparaging assessment -- directly provoked by your University’s press release -- is not supported by any credible study of which we are aware, let alone the flawed study on which the release was purportedly based.

The cloud cast by the University’s actions is truly regrettable. We strongly believe that our “Baby Einstein” videos provide a positive experience for children and families, one which encourages parent-child interaction and provides children with enriching and stimulating images and sounds drawn from real life. Millions of parents who have shared and enjoyed “Baby Einstein” videos with their children agree.

The press release unfairly disparaged that product by grossly misrepresenting the focus and extremely limited findings and conclusions of the study your University has issued in its name and endorsed. I hope you agree that as a respected academic institution you cannot allow that situation to continue. We therefore demand that the University immediately issue a retraction of the press release, and delete the release from its website, while emphasizing at least the following points, all of which are clear from the study itself:

1. The study collected no specific data concerning -- and conducted no specific evaluation of -- the viewing of "Baby Einstein" videos or their specific impact on children, and therefore no valid conclusions can be drawn from the study about the impact of the "Baby Einstein" videos on language acquisition or any other developmental measure;
2. The very limited nature of the study precluded the drawing of any causal inferences.

We further ask that the retraction and clarification be disseminated as widely as the original press release.

I look forward to discussing this matter further with you on our scheduled call.

Sincerely,

Robert A. Iger

cc: Stanley H. Barer  
Kristianne Blake  
Jeffrey H. Brotman  
Craig W. Cole  
William H. Gates  
Sally Jewell  
Frederick C. Kiga  
Erin Lennon  
Constance L. Proctor  
Herb Simon