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Pre-Preschool

New Devices Aim to Help Babies Start Learning Before Birth. But Are They Just a Lot of Noise?

By [Rachel Saslow](#)

Washington Post Staff Writer
Tuesday, September 29, 2009

For the first half of her pregnancy, Potomac resident Suzanne Ling played classical music for her unborn child whenever she drove her car. She had heard about "the Mozart effect" from a friend, who swore that classical music soothed her baby both pre- and post-delivery.



Suzanne Ling used a prenatal learning system while pregnant with her first child, Alexander. (By Susan Biddle For The Post)

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Around week 20, Ling discovered BabyPlus, an egg-shaped device that she wore around her growing abdomen. The device played 16 "audio lessons" of heartbeatlike tones and promised to teach a fetus to recognize patterns and differentiate sounds. After baby Alexander was born, Ling was certain that he was especially engaged, aware and smart. She's convinced that his exposure to the in utero "lessons" will help him avoid two conditions she fears: autism and attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder. Alexander, her first child, is now a year and a half old.

"At four months, his pediatrician said, 'I can tell you right away he's not autistic,'" Ling recalls. "Those were her exact words, because he's so engaged. His focus was remarkable for his age."

BabyPlus is one of a small number of "prenatal learning systems" being marketed to expectant parents these days. With such names as Lullabelly, Bellysonic and FirstSounds, they offer up everything from soothing tones to foreign languages as they promise anxious parents a better, calmer baby. Yet even as some parents pay upward of \$100 for these devices, experts say there is no proof, no scientific studies, to support the claims.

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"It probably won't do any good, and it can in fact be harmful," says Janet DiPietro, a developmental psychologist at Johns Hopkins University who has studied fetal development for 20 years. But, she added, many people "don't understand that anyone can say anything they want

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on that label and it's not vetted anywhere and those products are not FDA-regulated in any way."

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Measuring the effect of one of these devices is difficult. After all, how can you tell whether your baby would have turned out less smart or alert without a

prenatal learning system? A recent study in the journal *Child Development* found that fetuses, starting at 30 weeks, can acclimate to sounds over time and that they develop memory at 34 weeks. But does that suggest that the learning proposed by BabyPlus and other devices can occur? Dutch obstetrician-gynecologist Jan G. Nijhuis, who conducted the study, hesitates to make a correlation. "How could that be proven?" he wrote in an e-mail. "It is questionable why one would interfere with the natural environment of the fetus, who is busy enough."

People agree on this much: Starting at 18 weeks, fetuses can hear, and they listen to the mother's heartbeat, voices and other noises of daily life. With that in mind, makers of prenatal learning devices think that the period between 18 and 40 weeks is an opportunity to give soon-to-be-born babies a head start. (The BabyPlus slogan? "Your womb . . . the perfect classroom.")

Yet DiPietro and others say evolution has already created the ideal environment for the complicated human brain to develop -- a mother's womb -- and messing with that system is silly . . . or possibly dangerous. The devices could damage a baby's hearing and disrupt its sleep, DiPietro says. "Fetuses are almost always asleep. Here, you are introducing a stimulus to them while they're asleep. This is akin to taking your newborn, and when they're asleep in a bassinet, blasting Mozart at them. That's exactly what you're doing with these devices."

Lisa Jarrett, whose company sells BabyPlus, says the device is set to a safe, un-adjustable volume 40 decibels quieter than the mother's heartbeat. Jarrett's own experience as a mother of seven and anecdotal evidence from other mothers have convinced her that prenatal learning occurs. Jarrett first heard about the idea in the early 1990s when her husband, a reproductive endocrinologist, showed her a magazine article. The author, Brent Logan, who had no medical or scientific training, studied 12 babies who had gone through an in utero "curriculum" he devised; he wrote that simple rhythms boosted their cognitive development.

Logan says his interest in prenatal learning was sparked around 1980 when he saw pregnant women using the then-new Sony Walkman to pipe in music to their unborn children. So, he did his own study of what kind of sounds came into the womb.

"We were astonished," he says. "You could hear everything outside -- speaking, television, radio, honking horns, dogs, but it was muffled, like listening underwater."

From this, he concluded that there was a way to provide specific stimulation to babies during gestation that would have a positive effect once they were born. He developed a version of the BabyPlus device, using cassettes to deliver 16 audio lessons of increasing complexity in rhythm and tone.

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"They're much more ready for 'Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star' or 'Mary Had a Little Lamb' than they would be," Logan says.

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Suzanne Ling used a prenatal learning system while pregnant with her first child, Alexander. (By Susan Biddle For The Post)

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Jarrett, who once worked at an in-vitro fertilization laboratory, sent away for the cassette tapes when she got pregnant with her first child and used them with subsequent ones. They were all calm babies, good nursers and hit their pediatric milestones early, she says. "The way they learned was efficient."

So she licensed the rights for BabyPlus, which is now sold in more than 60 countries. She expects to move 19,000 units this year. A spokeswoman for A Pea in the Pod says the national maternity chain sells 50 to 75 BabyPlus units per month, for about \$150 apiece. It also sells the FirstSounds Deluxe Gift Set ("Listen, talk, and play music to your unborn baby!") for \$50.

Jarrett acknowledges that the effects provided by BabyPlus have not been proven, but she says a clinical trial, funded in part by her company's new nonprofit arm and set to start in November, will look at prenatal auditory stimuli. She expects it to support the theories behind her device.

"So-to-speak 'experts' don't have any clinical trials, either, to defend that a prenatal curriculum might not be beneficial," she says. "It's hard for us because we're really seeking out further validation. . . . We know that we're an entirely new niche and it's going to be legitimized in time. It just takes time."

Developers of the strap-on Ritmo audio belt have the same conviction. The system was spawned in part by interest in the controversial "Mozart effect," which was coined in 1993 after a University of Wisconsin psychologist published a study suggesting that college students performed better on parts of an IQ test after listening to classical music. Ritmo allows expectant mothers to play music (or anything else) to their growing fetus. Retailing for \$149, the elastic belt has a palm-size "controller hub" that plugs into four built-in speakers and an iPod or other MP3 player (not included). Mom has the option of listening along through headphones.

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According to Mercy D'silva, chief sales officer for the company producing Ritmo, the device allows parents to acclimate their babies in

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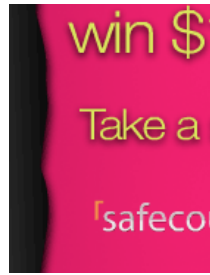
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uter to any sounds -- foreign languages, classical music -- chosen by the parents. The company cites the University of Wisconsin study and articles about fetal habituation as evidence.

"It's this beautiful connection you can have," she says.

Joan Loveland, an obstetrician-gynecologist with offices in the District, Maryland and Virginia, says one or two of her patients have inquired about prenatal education systems in the past few years, enough to inspire her to do some research.

"I tell patients it's an intriguing idea but it's hard to know what the overall benefits will be," Loveland says. "I say we don't have any evidence that it's harmful or helpful, but it's probably fine, if you want to spend that kind of money."

An ad in the back of a parenting magazine persuaded Kensington resident Paula Cross and her husband to try prenatal learning. She used the BabyPlus when she was pregnant with daughter Chelsie, now 15 months old. The couple called it the "baby boom boom" because of its pulsing noise, which accompanied Cross on her morning commute to work and lulled her to sleep at night during pregnancy.

"There's such a focus on kids achieving at a very young age," Cross says. "I teach middle school in Montgomery County, and they focus from kindergarten on up how to get into college. I'll take any step to get ahead of the game to help her learn basic fundamentals, to succeed and be the best she can be."

Did the device work? Cross says, "The proof is in the pudding." She believes her daughter is charismatic, well adjusted and smart. Cross talks up the BabyPlus to friends often and plans to use it during any future pregnancies.

Jessica Boger, on the other hand, came to a very different conclusion after researching prenatal learning online and in books. A lawyer and Capitol Hill mother, she decided that the science didn't hold up and also worried about interfering with her unborn baby's already complex process of forming neural connections. "I think we all want our children to be smart and successful and to get a head start, but I think a lot of companies feed off our insecurities about that," she says.

As Loveland, the OB-GYN, puts it: "Do we really need our fetuses to be in a classroom, or is it enough for them just to be fetuses? Can't we just appreciate that what nature is doing is so brilliant and so enormous that it's enough? I do worry that this stress will rob people of the joy of being pregnant. And that's a shame."

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