Children’s Advocacy Group Faults Learning Apps for Babies

By Natasha Singer  August 7, 2013 1:51 pm

The Walt Disney Company’s “Baby Einstein” videos do not turn babies into prodigies. And despite marketing claims by Fisher-Price, its popular “Laugh & Learn” mobile apps may not teach babies language or counting skills, according to a complaint filed on Wednesday with the Federal Trade Commission.

As mobile devices supplant television as entertainment vehicles for younger children, media and software companies increasingly see opportunities in the baby learning app market. But the complaint to the F.T.C. by the Campaign for a Commercial-Free Childhood, the same nonprofit group that helped prompt “Baby Einstein” to backtrack from its educational claims, challenges the idea that such apps provide more than simple entertainment value.

In addition to the complaint against Fisher-Price “Laugh & Learn” apps, which have been downloaded more than 2.8 million times, the advocacy group filed a similar complaint on Wednesday against apps for babies marketed by Open Solutions, a software developer.

According to the complaints, the companies say in marketing material that their apps teach infants spatial skills, numbers, language or motor skills. But, the complaints claim, there is no rigorous scientific evidence to prove that these kinds of products provide those benefits.

“The baby genius industry is notorious for marketing products as educational, when in fact there is no evidence that they are,” said Susan Linn, the director of the Campaign for a Commercial-Free Childhood, which is based in Boston. “Parents
deserve honest information about the educational value of the activities they choose for their children and they are not getting it from these companies.”

The group’s complaints also contend that using such apps “may be detrimental to very young children.” Ms. Linn said the programs could take time away from activities, like hands-on creative play or face-time with caring adults, that have proved beneficial for infant learning. She noted that the American Academy of Pediatrics recommends that parents avoid screen media for children under 2.

Kathleen Alfano, the senior director of child research at Fisher-Price, which is owned by Mattel, said that the company conducts extensive research “to create appropriate toys for the ways children play, discover and grow.” She added that the company had “appropriately extended these well researched play patterns into the digital space.”

Stefan Babinec, an executive at Open Solutions, which is based in Bratislava, Slovakia, said that his company’s marketing material does not make claims like “get this game and let it teach your child everything.” Rather, he said, the company thinks its apps “can help parents with babies, either by entertaining babies or help them see new things, animals, hear their sounds, etc.”

His company agrees that digital screens are not a replacement for live interactions with humans, he added, and assumes that children use its apps together with a parent, sibling or baby sitter.

Jay Mayfield, a spokesman for the F.T.C., confirmed that the agency had received the complaints but declined to comment on them.

The Campaign for a Commercial-Free Childhood pointed to seven iPhone or iPad apps marketed by Fisher-Price, along with eight by Open Solutions, which have been available for download on the Apple App or iTunes stores. The colorful apps feature animated or high-definition illustrations of animal characters who invite younger children to listen to phrases or animal noises or point to the animals’ ears, noses and other body parts. The apps are marketed as having educational value for very young children.
The information page for a Fisher-Price iPad app called “Laugh & Learn Let’s Count Animals for Baby,” for instance, says the app “teaches numbers and counting, 1-10, animals, first words and action/reaction.”

An information page for an app from Open Solutions called “Baby Hear and Read Verbs” makes more elaborate claims: “Here comes a new and innovative form of kids’ education. The application provides learning opportunity to learn how to read, pronounce and spell basic verbs. We have tested this app and the kids and parents simply love it!"

Russ Crupnick, senior vice president for industry analysis at the NPD Group, a market research firm, said that parents who had downloaded such apps often felt that the technology had made learning more entertaining and easier for their children. “A lot of parents think these apps are very educational,” he said, “especially for younger kids.”

The complaints against the app companies are only the latest salvo by the Campaign for a Commercial-Free Childhood against the electronic learning market aimed at infants and toddlers. Several years ago, the group filed a similar complaint against “Baby Einstein,” the hugely popular videos for infants; as a result, the Walt Disney Company, which owns the Baby Einstein Company, ultimately offered refunds to consumers who had bought the products.

In 2011, the group filed a complaint against the marketers of another popular video product, “Your Baby Can Read.” Ads for the videos suggested the products could teach infants as young as nine months old to read. Last year, the company, called Your Baby Can, agreed to settle charges of false advertising brought by the F.T.C.

Now app developers are marketing the same kinds of baby learning programs in mobile formats, Ms. Linn said, with the potential to increase the amount of time that infants spend in front of screens and affect their brain development. “This is one of our main concerns and why we take this industry on,” Ms. Linn said.

A version of this article appears in print on 08/08/2013, on page B8 of the New York edition with the headline: Group Criticizes Learning Apps for Babies.