

teract with their kids in ways that stretch their minds: reasoning with them, answering their questions and teaching them basic skills. "I see a lot of parents doing things for their children because it saves time," says Heather Miller, a parent educator. "Even one mom who tied her 12-year-old son's laces. You have to learn to stop and let him do things for himself."

A home visit is supposed to be fun. Visiting a five-year old called Lily, Ms Miller brings a game called "Five Little Monkeys", based on a popular nursery rhyme. It involves numbers, artful propaganda in favour of going to sleep and the thrill of watching plastic monkeys fall off a spring-loaded bed. Lily plays merrily, though her commentary is revealing. Asked to mime brushing her teeth, she says she uses bottled water because the stuff from the tap is "bad". (A recent chemical spill polluted the nearby river.)

When Lily was 18 months old, she did not talk. Zero to Three had her checked out and found that it was nothing to do with her intelligence: she simply had weak muscles in her mouth. The cure was cheap and jolly: her mom was shown how to tear up little bits of paper, scatter them on a table and dare Lily to blow them off through a straw. This strengthened her mouth muscles; now she chatters non-stop.

### Helping parents teach

Parent educators hand out books as presents for the kids and offer leaflets to the parents. "Of the nine families I see, none buy[s] parenting books. But most look at the material I leave," says Jennifer Parsons, another parent educator. The programme in West Virginia is cheap: about \$1,800 per family each year. It has not been around long enough for its effectiveness to be assessed, but others have. A review of 11 home-visiting programmes by the federal health department found that seven led to at least two lasting benefits (eg, making the child healthier or better-prepared for school). A pre-school programme called HIPPI, which aims to teach parents how to be their children's first teachers, appears to boost reading scores significantly.

Do such benefits last? In the 1960s a group of vulnerable pre-schoolers in Michigan were randomly selected either to enroll in a programme of daily coaching from well-trained teachers plus weekly home visits, or to join a control group. The early results were amazing: after a year the kids who took part were outscoring the control group by ten IQ points.

Disappointingly, that difference faded by the age of ten, leading many to doubt that the Perry project (named after the school where it took place) actually worked. However, even if it didn't boost their IQ scores for long, the intervention appears to have taught them other useful skills, such as self-discipline and persever-

### Stressed parents

## Cancel that violin class

BETHESDA, MARYLAND

Helicopter moms and dads will not harm their kids if they relax a bit

WELL-TO-DO parents fear two things: that their children will die in a freak accident, and that they will not get into Harvard. The first fear is wildly exaggerated. The second is not, but staying awake all night worrying about it will not help—and it will make you miserable.

Modern parents see risks that their own parents never considered. They put gates at the top of stairs, affix cushions to table corners and jam plastic guards into sockets to stop small fingers from getting electrocuted. Those guards are "potential choking hazards", jests Lenore Skenazy, the author of "Free-Range Kids". Ms Skenazy let her nine-year-old son ride the New York subway on his own. He was thrilled; but when she spoke about it on tv, a mob of worrywarts called her "America's worst mom".

Yet in fact American children are staggeringly safe. A kid under five in the 1950s was five times as likely to die (of disease, in an accident, etc) than the same kid today. The chance of a child being kidnapped and murdered by a stranger is a minuscule one in 1.5m.

What about academic success? Surely the possibility of getting into Harvard justifies any amount of driving junior from violin lesson to calculus tutor?



Bryan Caplan, an economist at George Mason University, says it does not. In "Selfish Reasons To Have More Kids", he points to evidence that genes matter far more than parenting. A Minnesota study found that identical twins grow up to be similarly clever regardless of whether they are raised in the same household or in separate ones. Studies in Texas and Colorado found that children adopted by high-IQ families were no smarter than those adopted by average families. A Dutch study found that if you are smarter than 80% of the population, you should expect your identical twin raised in another home to be smarter than 76% but your adopted sibling to be average. Other twin and adopted studies find that genes have a huge influence on academic and financial success, while parenting has only a modest effect.

The crucial caveat is that adoptive parents have to pass stringent tests. So adoption studies typically compare nice middle-class homes with other nice middle-class homes; they tell you little about the effect of growing up in a poor or dysfunctional household.

The moral, for Mr Caplan, is that middle-class parents should relax a bit, cancel a violin class or two and let their kids play outside. "If your parenting style passes the laugh test, your kids will be fine," he writes. He adds that if parents fretted less about each child, they might find it less daunting to have three instead of two. And that might make them happier in the long run. No 60-year-old ever wished for fewer grandchildren.

Does over-parenting hurt children? Probably not; but it exhausts parents. Hence the cascade of books with titles like "All Joy And No Fun" and "Go The F\*\*k To Sleep". Kids notice when their parents are overdoing it. Ellen Galinsky, a researcher, asked 1,000 kids what they would most like to change about their parents' schedules. Few wanted more face time; the top wish was for mom and dad to be less tired and stressed.

ance. The Perry pre-schoolers were far more likely than the control group to graduate from high school on time (77% to 60%). And by the age of 40, they were more likely to earn \$20,000 a year or more (60% to 40%) and less likely to have been arrested five times or more (36% to 55%).

Perry generated \$16 of benefit for every \$1 spent on it, by one estimate. Another pre-school programme in Chicago showed

a benefit-to-cost ratio of 10 to 1; the Elmira project in upstate New York was five to one; the Abecedarian project in North Carolina was four to one.

All this suggests that, when it comes to education, the best returns will come not from pumping yet more money into schools but from investing in the earliest years of life. And that includes lending a helping hand to parents who struggle. ■