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THE CLASH BETWEEN PARENT AESTHETICS AND BABY DEVELOPMENT

I almost bought our "sad beige baby" a sad gray bounce chair.

Like most new parents, I'm constantly reminded that I don't know what the Fuddruckers I'm doing, and that one day, my six-month-old will need a psychologist. I just don't know what for (yet).

Case in point: days into the life of Leni, our daughter, my wife and I bought a chic, gray $125 bounce chair that matched the chic, gray swivel chairs in our living room (before they gained a natural patina of spit-up).

But Aunt Jessie said "absolutely not" to the gray bouncer.

Aunt Jessie is pediatric occupational therapist Jessica Kahn, owner of Blue Sky Therapeutics in Park City. For over 20 years, she has worked with children with disabilities and development delays.

I turn to Kahn with all Leni-related questions. Her husband, Brian, babysat me as a kid, so I feel like it's fair compensation for the damage he did. I mean, he let my brothers and I watch the film *Revenge of the Nerds* as single-digit-year-olds. To be fair, my dad played it for us first (and still regrets that decision 30ish years later).

Anyway, Kahn vetoed the gray bouncer. Instead, she suggested a gray-red-orange-green-turquoise-blue $25 bouncer with a built-in animal mobile that felt, in spirit and style, like the pair of discounted green Crocs I had started wearing outside of the house.

Without an intervention, my wife and I were probably going to raise what the internet now calls a "sad beige baby" (TikTok or YouTube it—you'll thank me later). And that can have sad tradeoffs, based on Kahn's clinical experience.

Initially, babies only see black and white. Thus, the trend two decades ago was to surround infants with high-contrast black and white objects, like in a psychedelic room at Meow Wolf. There was something to it. "For a baby that's not moving a lot, you are encouraging visual tracking. You're encouraging depth perception. When you encourage the eyes to move, what has to move with the eyes eventually? The head and neck," Kahn explains.

High-contrast colors motivate infants to visually explore their environment. "From visually exploring their environment, the body naturally has to follow that," Kahn says. Color begets motion.

Sound is also crucial because it helps infants establish cause and effect. It might look like a baby is randomly hitting her feet on plastic piano keys, but as she associates foot movement with cool noises, she's motivated to move more. Yes, those loud baby toys have a purpose besides annoying parents and searing their neurons with a song about a purple monkey in a bubblegum tree.

What if a baby lives in a sad beige environment without contrast or noise? "I could argue that a baby that is just staring at the ceiling or not stimulated to move might, down the road, have some sort of possible motor deficits, or even an inability to look at a piece of paper and track from left to right when we're reading or writing," says Kahn.

Put simply, colors and sounds help babies develop motor skills that eventually support intellectual development.

It never occurred to me that there would be a conflict between parents' aesthetic tastes and what is healthy for their kids. And it seemed even crazier that a toymaker might exploit widespread ignorance of that clash to sell me on a $125 bouncer.

To be clear, there's a place for cute beige clothes and gray baby gear. We just need to recognize when aesthetics clash with our ability to provide a stimulating environment.

The point of a colorful, noisy environment is in Kahn's job title. She's heard many people say, "You're a pediatric OT? Kids don't have jobs." But OTs define occupation as all the different activities that a person does throughout the day. A baby's occupation, says Kahn, is to play and learn.

The more we play with our kids and encourage learning, the better we're fulfilling our occupation as parents. Diverse colors, noises, textures, materials, and experiences support that play and learning.

Look, there's immense pressure to be a "good" parent. I felt, momentarily, like a bad parent when I realized that Leni's gray bouncer would deprive her of stimulation.



JESSICA KAHN OF BLUE SKY THERAPEUTICS



LENI'S BOUNCER AND DAD'S CROCS

My conversations with Kahn alleviated most of that guilt. Serious marketing dollars have been spent to convince us that a baby's environment should be as pleasingly Zen as an urban Airbnb loft. Plus, the high price tag for sad beige gear can mislead us into thinking it's safer or better.

"I get that we don't want to turn our house into Romper Room or a preschool room," Kahn concedes. "But listen, you had a kid... it kind of comes with the territory."

Our kid is for sure going to need a psychologist. Just not for a lack of color or noise.