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GIGGLES 4 TOTS

Puppet gives babies a hand learning their ABC's

BY LISA CHASE

Nearly everyone has seen or at least heard of the adorable ewe sock puppet Lamb Chop, but few realize that its late creator Shari Lewis' daughter has been following in her "handsteps" since the age of 12.

"My entire professional career was spent learning from her," says Mallory Lewis. "I started as a ghostwriter for my mom's syndicated column and was also her show writer and then senior producer."

Now Lewis is introducing her own endearing fictional daughter, Giggles, in the Starz Home Entertainment DVD "Phonics 4 Babies: Baby's First Words," for ages 6 months to 5, which was released on Tuesday (\$13.49, amazon.com).

On a quest to unleash the genius in your child, Lewis and Giggles incorporate music, action and animation to engage toddlers in the process of building a pho-

nic foundation, such as formulating vowels and consonants as well as identifying certain shapes and items, like bananas.

"The most important thing we can do is talk to our children," says the native New Yorker. "They acquire it by hearing it. Ideally, Mom and Dad would be home talking to little Junior all day, but we don't live in that world. In fact, most day-care centers are not manned by English speakers, so who is teaching these kids to talk?"

"Plus, any child who is not a reader starting kindergarten is already behind. Our society is demanding more and more of our children at an earlier age. Therefore, children need to know their letters in preschool." The DVD also emphasizes social interaction, manners and good-natured relationships.

"You want to put something on television that is positive, especially for the

mother/child relationship. And you don't want someone talking down to your child. Most grown-up hosts start programs with, 'Now boys and girls,' which makes me want to hurl! Kids aren't stupid; they just don't know stuff yet!"

Childhood friend and former longtime CNBC host Liz Claman was thrilled to be a "test mom" for the DVD.

"My son Julian was the perfect age of 2 when he saw this," the mother of two says. "People get hyper about kids watching TV, but if you restrict it without being frantic and crazy, it can be good."

"Instead of turning his brain into mush watching this DVD, Julian was walking up to the television and pointing at the answers when Mallory would ask, 'Where is the bar of soap?' For me to see that, I was thrilled."

"Of course it didn't surprise me, to have someone like Mallory — who is brilliant

'Kids aren't stupid; they just don't know stuff yet.'



Mallory Lewis (with Giggles, top) is following in the "handsteps" of her late mom, ventriloquist Shari Lewis (l.), a kids' favorite with her puppet Lamb Chop.

and raised from her genius mother; it was a dream come true to see that as a mom.

"It was the best of Shari and the best of Mallory and my kid responded immediately, running up to the TV and talking to it, saying, 'E, e, elbow!'"

"Now he has the alphabet down and it's helping him read more quickly. Even his 5-year-old sister, Gabrielle, found certain things compelling, like the counting, the humor and some of the phonics."

Moms and dads will be pleased to know that manners are a huge emphasis of the program. Mallory makes sure the words, "please" and "thank you" are not only pronounced, but also used properly. "That really solidified my son's understanding about how to react when people do things for you," says Claman.