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"I Can Speak!™"

by George Saunders | June 13, 1999 | The New Yorker

Mrs. Ruth Faniglia
210 Lester Street
Rochester, N.Y. 14623

Dear Mrs. Faniglia,

We were very sorry to receive your letter of 23 Feb., which accompanied the *i can speak!*™ you returned, much to our disappointment. We here at KidLuv believe that the *i can speak!*™ is an innovative and essential educational tool that, used with proper parental guidance, offers a rare early-development opportunity for babies and toddlers alike. And so I thought I would take some of my personal time (I am on lunch) and try to address the questions you raised in your letter, which is here in front of me on my (cluttered!) desk.

First, may I be so bold as to suggest that your disappointment may stem from your own, perhaps unreasonable, expectations? Because in your letter, what you indicated, when I read it, was that you think and/or thought that somehow the *product* can read your baby's mind? Our product cannot read your baby's mind, Mrs. Faniglia. No one can read a baby's mind, at least not yet. Although believe me, we are probably working on it! All the *i can speak!*™ can do, however, is respond to aural patterns in a way that makes baby seem older. Say baby sees a peach. If you or Mr. Faniglia (I hope I do not presume) were to loudly say something like "What a delicious peach!" the *i can speak!*™, hearing this, through that little slotted hole near the neck, would respond by saying something like "i like peach." Or "i want peach." Or, if you had chosen the ICS2000 (you chose the ICS1900, which is fine, perfectly good for most babies), the *i can speak!*™ might even respond by saying something like "fruit. isn't that one of the major food groups?" Which would be pretty good, for a six-month-old like Derek, your son, don't you think?

But here I must reiterate: That would not in reality be Derek speaking. Derek would not in reality know that a peach is fruit, or that fruit is a major food group. The *i can speak!*™ knows, however, and, from its position on Derek's face, it will give the illusion that Derek knows, by giving the illusion that Derek is speaking out of the twin moving SimuLips. But that is it. That is all we claim.

Furthermore, in your letter, Mrs. Faniglia, you state that the *i can speak!*™ "mask" (your terminology) takes on a "stressed-out look when talking that is not what a real baby's talking face appears like but is more like some nervous middle-aged woman." Well, maybe that is so, but, with all due respect, you try it! You try making a latex face look and talk and move like the real face of an actual live baby! Inside are over 5000 separate circuits and 390 moving parts. And as far as looking like a middle-aged woman, we beg to differ: we do not feel that a middle-aged stressed-out woman has (1) no hair on head and (2) chubby cheeks and (3) fine downy facial hair. The ICS1900 unit is definitely the face of a baby, Mrs. Faniglia. We took over twenty-five hundred photos of different babies and using a computer combined them to make this face, this face we call Male Composite 37 or, affectionately, Little Roger. But what you possibly seem to be unhappy about is that Little Roger's face is not Derek's face? To be frank, Mrs. Faniglia, many of you, our customers, have found it disconcerting that their baby looks different with the *i can speak!*™ on. Which we find so surprising. Did you, we often wonder, not look at the cover of the box? On that cover the ICS1900 is very plainly shown, situated on a sort of rack, looking face-wise like Little Roger, albeit Little Roger is a bit crumpled and has a forehead furrow of sorts.

But this is why we came up with the ICS2100. With the ICS2100, your baby looks just like your baby. And, because we do not want anyone to be unhappy with us, we would like to give you a complimentary ICS2100 upgrade! We would like to come to your house on Lester Street and make a personalized plaster cast of Derek's real, actual face! And soon, via FedEx, here will come Derek's face in a box, and when you slip that ICS2100 over Derek's head and Velcro the Velcro, he will look so very much like himself! Plus we

have another free surprise, which is that, while at your house, we will tape his actual voice and use it to make our phrases, the phrases Derek will subsequently say. So not only will he look like himself, he will sound like himself, as he crawls around your house appearing to speak!

Plus we will throw in several other personalizing options. Say you call Derek “Lovemeister.” (I am using this example from my own personal home, as my wife, Ann, and I call our son Billy “Lovemeister,” because he is so sweet.) With the ICS2100, you might choose to have Derek say, upon crawling into a room, “*here comes the lovemeister!*” or “*stop talking dirty, the lovemeister has arrived!*” How we do this is, laser beams coming out of the earlobes, which sense the doorframe. So the *i can speak!*TM knows it has just entered a room, from its position on Derek’s head! And also you will have over one hundred Discretionary Phrases to more highly personalize Derek. For instance, you might choose to have him say, on his birthday, “*mommy and daddy, remember that time you conceived me in aruba?*” Although probably you did not in fact conceive Derek in Aruba. That we do not know. (Our research is not that extensive!) Or say your dog comes up and gives Derek a lick? You could make Derek say (if your dog’s name is Queenie), “*queenie, give it a rest!*” Which, you know what? It makes you love him more. Because suddenly he is articulate. Suddenly he is not just sitting there going glub glub glub while examining a piece of his own feces on his own thumb, which is something we recently found Billy doing! Sometimes we have felt that our childless friends think badly of us for having a kid who just goes glub glub glub in the corner while looking at his feces on his thumb. But now when childless friends are over, what we have found, my wife, Ann, and I, is that it’s great to have your kid say something witty and self-possessed years before he or she would actually in reality be able to say something witty or self-possessed. The bottom line is that it’s just *fun* when you and your childless friends are playing cards, and your baby suddenly blurts out (in his *very own probable future voice*), “*it is likely that we still don’t fully understand the import of all of einstein’s findings!*”

Gives ex of their upgrades
from personal experience

Here I must admit that we have several times seen a sort of softening in the eyes of our resolute childless friends, as if they, too, would suddenly like to have a baby.

And as far as Derek flinching whenever that voice issues forth from him? When that speaker near his mouth sort of buzzes his lips? May I say this is not unusual? What I suggest? Try putting the ICS on Derek for a short time at first, maybe ten minutes a day, then gradually building up his Wearing Time. That is what we did. And it worked super. Now Billy wears his even while sleeping. In fact, if we forget to put it back on after his bath, he pitches a fit. Kind of begs for it! He starts to say, you know, “Mak! Mak!” Which we think is his word for mask. And when we put the mask on and Velcro the Velcro, he says, or rather it says, “*guten morgen, papa!*” because we are trying to teach him German, and have installed the German Learning module in our ICS2100. Or for example, if his pants are not yet on, he’ll say, “*how about slapping on my rompers so i can get on with my day!*” (I wrote that one.)

My point is, with the ICS2100 Billy is much, much cleverer than he ever was with the ICS1900. He has recently learned, for example, that if he spills a little milk on his chin, his SimuLips will issue a *moo* sound. Which he really seems to get a kick out of! I’ll be in the living room doing a little evening paperwork and from the kitchen I’ll hear, you know, “*moo! moo! moo!*” And I’ll rush in, and there’ll be this sort of lake of milk on the floor. And there’ll be Billy, pouring milk on his chin until I yank the milk away, at which point he bellows, “*don’t fence me in.*” (Ann’s contribution—she was raised in Wyoming!)

I, for one, Mrs. Faniglia, do not believe that any baby wants to sit around all day going glub glub glub. My feeling is that a baby, sitting in its diaper, looking around at the world, thinks to itself, albeit in some crude nonverbal way, What the heck is wrong with me, why am I the only one going glub glub glub while all these other folks are talking in whole complete sentences? And hence, possibly, lifelong psychological damage may result. Now, am I saying that your Derek runs the risk of feeling bad about himself as a grownup because as a

baby he felt he didn't know how to talk right? No, it is not for me to say that, Mrs. Faniglia, I am only in Sales. But I will say that I am certainly not taking any chances with our Billy. **My belief is that when Billy hears a competent, intelligent voice issuing from the area near his mouth, he feels excellent about himself.** And I feel excellent about him. Not that I didn't feel excellent about him before. But now we can actually have a sort of conversation! And also—and most importantly—when that voice issues from his SimuLips he learns something invaluable; namely, that when he finally does begin speaking, he will be speaking via using his mouth.

Now, Mrs. Faniglia, you may be thinking, Hold on a sec, of course this guy loves his **i can speak!**™ He probably gets his for free! But not so, Mrs. Faniglia, I get mine for two grand, just like you. We get no discounts, so much in demand is the **i can speak!**™, and in addition we are strongly encouraged by our management to purchase and use the **i can speak!**™ at home, on our own kids. (Or even, in one case, on an elderly senile mom! Suffice it to say that, though she looks sort of funny with the Little Roger head on her somewhat frail frame, the family takes great comfort in hearing all the witty things she has to say. Just like her old self!) Not that I wouldn't use it otherwise. Believe me, I would. Since we upgraded to the ICS2100, things have been great, Billy looks almost identical to himself, and is not nearly so, you know, boring as before, when we had the ICS1900, which (frankly) says some rather predictable things, which I expect is partly why you were so unhappy with it, Mrs. Faniglia, you seem like a very intelligent woman. When people come over now, sometimes we just gather around Billy and wait for his next howler, and last weekend my supervisor, Mr. Ted Ames, stopped by (a super guy, he has really given me support, please let him know if you've found this letter at all helpful) and boy did we all crack up laughing when Billy began rubbing his face very rapidly across the carpet in order to make his ICS2100 shout, "*friction is a common and useful source of heat!*"

Mrs. Faniglia, it is nearing the end of my lunch, and so I must wrap this up, but I hope I have been of service. On a personal note, I did not have the greatest of pasts when I came here, having been in a few scrapes and even rehab situations, but now, wow, the commissions

roll in, and I have made a nice life for me and Ann and Billy. Not that the possible loss of my commission is the reason for my concern. Please do not think so. While it is true that, if you decline my upgrade offer and persist in your desire to return your ICS1900, my commission must be refunded, by me, to Mr. Ames, it is no big deal, I have certainly refunded commissions to Mr. Ames before, especially lately. I don't quite know what I'm doing wrong. But that is not your concern, Mrs. Faniglia. Your concern is Derek. My real reason for writing this letter, on my lunch break, is that, hard as we all work at KidLuv to provide innovative and essential development tools for families like yours, Mrs. Faniglia, it is always sort of a heartbreak when our products are misapprehended. Please do accept our offer of a free ICS2100 upgrade. We at KidLuv really love what kids are, Mrs. Faniglia, which is why we want them to become something better as soon as possible! Baby's early years are so precious, and must not be wasted, as we are finding out, as our Billy grows and grows, learning new skills every day.

Sincerely yours,
Rick Sminks
Product Service Representative
KidLuv, Inc. ♦

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