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TIMES STAFF WRITER

Mallory Lewis -- performer, children's book author and daughter of Shari Lewis -- grew up with the iconic ventriloquist's signature sidekick Lamb Chop -- "she's my sister" -- and became a writer and producer who worked closely with her mother on TV specials and children's shows ("Lamb Chop's Play-Along," "The Charlie Horse Music Pizza") Since Shari Lewis' death in 1998, Mallory has kept her mother's legacy alive through performances with the famously sassy sock puppet.

"Mallory is a very talented ventriloquist, surprisingly, considering the short number of years she's been doing it," said Pat Brymer, Shari Lewis' longtime master puppeteer and builder. "If Pat had said, 'Nah, you don't have it,' I would have stopped," Lewis said.

Lewis puts that expertise to use in her latest project, "Phonics 4 Babies," a DVD series created by husband-and-wife team Joseph and Cassandra Giangrosso and shaped by clinical advisors including a speech pathologist and child psychologist.

Set in a colorful, computer-generated fantasy world, the series' goal is to teach toddlers simple words and vowel and consonant sounds through a team of "Tummy Tots" -- roly-poly, big-eyed, baby caterpillar puppets. Taking the lead: Lewis and her mischievous "daughter," a Tummy Tot named Giggles. ("Lamb Chop is very supportive of her niece," Lewis joked.)

Giggles was custom-built by Brymer, now the younger Lewis' master puppeteer. When they shot the DVD -- Lewis on camera, Brymer on the floor working strings for Giggles' arms and legs -- "we looked at each other and smiled," Lewis said, "because Pat's been on the floor supporting my family and making what we do possible for decades."

The series launches with "Baby's First Words," due out next week.

"We teach through songs and images," said Lewis. "We're not trying to teach 'antidisestablishmentarianism.' Just the first 300 words: up, down, please, thank you, the names of colors and numbers."

"You don't want to frustrate kids," said Giangrosso, a veteran children's video producer, whose toddler daughter inspired the project. "We tried to make sure that everything was obtainable."

What do they think about recent research published in the Journal of Pediatrics suggesting that educational DVDs for babies could limit parent-baby interaction and actually hinder language development?

Saying that young children should spend more time with their parents and less time with TV “was like a headline that said, ‘The sun will rise tomorrow,’ ” said Lewis, whose son Jamie is 8.

She envisions “Phonics 4 Babies” as a supplemental tool to help children acquire verbal skills, not as a replacement for parental communication. “It’s not a DVD’s fault if a parent misuses it,” Lewis said. “It’s the parent’s fault.”

Still, titles for future releases in the series may be changed to “Phonics 4 Toddlers.”

“Because, of course, the e-mails were flying fast and furious when the study came out,” said Lewis. “My computer was smoking between the distributor and the publicist going, ‘How are we going to respond to this?’ But my feeling on the whole subject is, ‘Aw, come on.’

“The ideal way to use this video is to watch it with your child. Learn the songs. ‘Bathtime,’ ‘Cookies and Milk’ -- they’re songs that you can repeat later with your kids as you’re doing the appropriate activity.

“Or you can put the DVD in, let your child enjoy it and know that they’re watching pretty colors and happy songs and a loving interaction. That can only be a good thing.”

Shari Lewis, said her daughter, “dedicated her life to giving children as much information as possible in the most respectful way possible. I feel like I’m carrying on the torch, not just of Lamb Chop, but of ‘educating’ children the best way I know how.”

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