

Foreign Language Learning:

Unlock Your Child's Global Potential

by Dr. Jenn Berman

Study after study shows that the benefits of second language learning for children can be dramatic, affecting children neurologically, psychologically and socially. According to Dr. Kendall King and Dr. Alison Mackey, authors of *The Bilingual Edge*, children who are highly proficient in a second language tend to experience:

Increased creativity, Flexibility in thinking, Higher test scores, Improved literacy, Metalinguistic awareness (the understanding of language as a system), Better focus, Cross-cultural understanding, Adaptability, & Increased competitiveness in the job market.

Three Windows of Opportunity

We are all born with the ability to hear the subtle differences between all sorts of different sounds, even those of languages to which we are not exposed. For example, adult Japanese speakers who do not speak a second language are not able to hear the difference between "L" and "R" sounds. However, studies have found that Japanese infants are born able to hear the tonal differences between those two sounds but lose the ability over time from disuse. That window of ability to hear different sounds beyond one's native language, known as a "critical period," dramatically begins to decline around the age of ten months.

If you are interested in teaching your child a second language but your young child is already long past 10 months old, do not despair. While earlier is best, the next "window" doesn't close until your child is around the age of six, so there may still be time. According to a Parent's Press article entitled "Earlier Is Better," from birth until puberty, the brain literally formats itself to perform various specialized functions, such as language acquisition and use, based upon the input it gets from the world it experiences. Neural networks gradually form and they will function more and more efficiently as they are used. If a second language is part of that input, networks for understanding and using it will grow richer. Therefore, early exposure to a second language actually causes more connections to grow in a child's

brain and those connections, in turn, allow for easier learning in both the second and, surprisingly, the first language as well. This process, while continuing at different rates throughout your life, is especially active in the first six years.

Another window of opportunity for easy language acquisition shuts around puberty due to a process in the brain that disposes of connections it no longer uses, making it more difficult to recognize those unfamiliar sounds that may be used in another language. In addition, once they hit puberty, teens tend to be less willing to take risks for fear of looking foolish. Learning a new language requires a person to make mistakes out loud and often.

When Should You Start?

All the experts seem to agree that the earlier you expose your child to another language, the better. According to Angelika Putintseva, the director of WorldSpeak, a popular language school for children located on Los Angeles' Westside, parents are best off exposing their children to a second language from "day one." However, in order to benefit from a language class, Putintseva says that infants need to have some level of attention and be able to respond, and so her school begins their classes for children at 10 months of age. Offering more than a dozen languages for children, they offer different programs for children beginning this process at different ages since the learning process is different for each age group. When looking for a language program for your child, you should look for one that offers programs geared specifically for children of different ages.

Can Children Learn More Than One Language?

It is very possible for children to become multilingual. Putintseva reports that she has had students in her program speaking four and five languages. Her son, Max, for example, speaks five languages. Experts believe that once your child learns a second language, future language learning tends to happen much faster and easier. "Language is a code and once you have this code presented to you, you have a template," explains Putintseva. This makes it easier for children to understand that there are many different words for one object in many different languages. This kind of abstract thinking makes it easier to conceptualize new languages.

Putintseva says that at her school, Spanish is the most popular language class for children, followed by Chinese and then French. Many language experts believe that Mandarin Chinese has become "the new Spanish." In fact, Mandarin Chinese is currently the most common language spoken in the world with almost a billion native. Many parents feel that teaching their children Chinese gives them a global advantage. In addition, although Chinese is a difficult language to learn as an adult, it comes much easier for young children.

What You Can Do To Help Facilitate Language Acquisition

Speak the language at home. Even if you are not fluent, simple things like counting or songs in another language can be good exposure to help to reinforce their learning.

Children's language classes are a great place for your child to learn a language.

Foreign language playgroups are a great way to reinforce learning in a fun environment. Start a playgroup for other children and parents who are learning the same language and make a rule that the new language will be the only one spoken during the group.

Bring a tutor to your home to help with supplemental language exposure. Make sure it is someone who understands how children learn and will keep it fun for your child.

There are many fun language-learning DVDs for kids. Don't just plop your kid in front of the TV, though, and let him teach himself. Language experts say videos are most effective if parents use them as a catalyst for dialog with their child.

Play music in the language your child is learning.

Read books together in the new language.

Have a language night in which your whole family only speaks that language. You might even want to eat the native cuisine or watch a movie in that language.

Plan a family trip someplace where native speakers use the language your child is learning.

Do your best to encounter people who speak the language, even if it means going to places you might not ordinarily go.

For further resources, information, and/or to ask Dr. Jenn your questions, please email her at drjenn@familymagazinegroup.com.

