

Why, How, and When Should My Child Learn a Second Language?

by Kathleen Marcos

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Much media attention has recently been focused on the importance of early learning experiences on brain development. Newsweek devoted a special edition to the critical first 3 years of a child's life and indicated that there is a "window of opportunity" for second language learning starting at 1 year of age. A February 1997 article in Time magazine suggested that foreign languages should be taught to children as early as possible. With so many demands already placed on children, parents might ask: Is it important that my child learns a second language at a young age? Why? What options are available?

What Are the Benefits of Knowing a Second Language?

In addition to developing a lifelong ability to communicate with more people, children may derive other benefits from early language instruction, including improved overall school performance and superior problem-solving skills. Knowing a second language ultimately provides a competitive advantage in the workforce by opening up additional job opportunities.

Students of foreign languages score statistically higher on standardized tests conducted in English. In its 1992 report, College Bound Seniors: The 1992 Profile of SAT and Achievement Test Takers, the College Entrance Examination Board reported that students who averaged 4 or more years of foreign language study scored higher on the verbal section of the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) than those who had studied 4 or more years in any other subject area. In addition, the average mathematics score for individuals who had taken 4 or more years of foreign language study was identical to the average score of those who had studied 4 years of mathematics. These findings are consistent with College Board profiles for previous years.

Students of foreign languages have access to a greater number of career possibilities and develop a deeper understanding of their own and other cultures. Some evidence also suggests that children who receive second language instruction are more creative and better at solving complex problems. The benefits to society are many. Americans fluent in other languages enhance our economic competitiveness abroad, improve global communication, and maintain our political and security interests.

Why Is It Better for My Child To Learn a Language in Elementary School?

Studies have shown — and experience has supported, that children who learn a language before the onset of adolescence are much more likely to have native-like pronunciation. A number of experts attribute this proficiency to physiological changes that occur in the maturing brain as a child enters puberty. Of course, as with any subject, the more years a child can devote to learning a language, the more competent he or she will become. In any case, introducing children to alternative ways of expressing themselves and to different cultures generally broadens their outlook and gives them the opportunity to communicate with many more people.

How Are Languages Taught to Children?

The three major types of programs available in elementary schools are language immersion programs, foreign language in elementary schools (FLES) programs, and foreign language exploratory (FLEX) programs.

- Immersion programs allow children to spend part or all of the school day learning in a second language. In full (total) immersion programs, which are available in a limited number of schools, children learn all of their subjects (math, social studies, science, etc.) in the second language. Partial immersion programs operate on the same principle, but only a portion of the curriculum is presented in the second language. In this type of program, a child may learn social studies and science in Spanish or French in the morning and learn mathematics and language arts in English in the afternoon. In both cases, the second language is the medium for content instruction rather than the subject of instruction. Children enrolled in immersion programs work toward full proficiency in the second language and usually reach a higher level of competence than those participating in other language programs.
- **FLES programs** are more common than immersion programs. A second language is presented as a distinct subject, much as science or social studies. Typically, the course is taught three to five times per week. Depending on the frequency of the classes and the opportunity for practice, children in these programs may attain substantial proficiency in the language studied.
- **FLEX programs** introduce students to other cultures and to language as a general concept. Time is spent exploring one or more languages or learning about language itself. The emphasis is not on attaining proficiency. Although some proficiency may be attained with a once- or twice- per-week program emphasizing the use of a specific language, parents should not expect children to attain fluency in such programs. These programs, however, can provide a basis for later learning.

Will a Second Language Interfere With My Child's English Ability?

In most cases, learning another language enhances a child's English ability. Children can learn much about English by learning the structure of other languages. Common vocabulary also helps children learn the meaning of new words in English. Experimental studies have shown that no long-term delay in native English language development occurs in children participating in second language classes, even in full immersion programs.

In fact, children enrolled in foreign language programs score statistically higher on standardized tests conducted in English. A number of reports have demonstrated that children who have learned a second language earn higher SAT scores, particularly on the verbal section of the test. One study showed that by the fifth year of an immersion program, students outperformed all comparison groups and remained high academic achievers throughout their schooling.

If My Child Is Enrolled in a Language Program at School, What Can I Do To Help?

Most importantly, encourage your child's interest in the language and in other cultures. Show him or her that you value the ability to speak a second language. Attend cultural events that feature music, dance, or food from the country or countries where the language is spoken. If possible, provide some books, videos, or other materials in the second language. If you are familiar with the language yourself, read to your child. Summer programs offering international exchange are suitable for older children and offer valuable opportunities to speak a second language and explore a different culture firsthand. Children normally live with a host family, which provides them with a safe and sheltered environment where they can practice their language skills.

If My Child's School Does Not Offer Language Study, What Can I Do To Help Establish a Program?

Speak to the school principal about your interest in seeing a program established. Determine what type of program best fits your needs. Join with other parents interested in starting up a program. Discuss the possibility at a PTA meeting. Write to the teachers, the school board, and the school district headquarters. Many resources are available to help parents and teachers establish a second language program. For general information on early language programs, contact the following organizations:

Advocates for Language Learning
P.O. Box 4962
Culver City, CA 90231
Phone: 310-313-3333

American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages
6 Executive Plaza
Yonkers, NY 10701-6801
Phone: 914-963-8830
Fax: 914-963-1275
E-mail: actflhq@aol.com
Web: <http://www.actfl.org>

ERIC Clearinghouse on Languages and Linguistics
4646 40th Street, NW
Washington, DC 20016-1859
Toll free: 800-276-9834
E-mail: eric@cal.org
Web: <http://www.cal.org/ericcll>

The National FLES* Institute
The University of Maryland at Baltimore
Department of Modern Languages and Linguistics
Baltimore, MD 21228
Phone: 410-455-2336

National Network for Early Language Learning
Center for Applied Linguistics
4646 40th Street, NW
Washington, DC 20016-1859
Phone: 202-362-0700
E-mail: nnell@cal.org
Web: <http://www.educ.iastate.edu/nnell>

Sources

References identified with EJ or ED are abstracted in the ERIC database. EJ references are journal articles available at most research libraries. ED references are available in microfiche collections at more than 900 locations or in paper copy from the ERIC Document Reproduction Service at 1-800-443-ERIC. Call 1-800-LET-ERIC for more details.

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