

# Earlier is Better

## Do You Want Your Children To Learn a Second Language? Start Them Before Puberty!

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Puberty may be the time of many new beginnings independence, physical changes, social experimentation but it also marks the end of a child's window of opportunity for easily acquiring additional languages. (Some parents insist that adolescence also means the end of English communication itself but that's a subject for a whole other article.)

Science suggests that when it comes to ease of learning and proficiency in a foreign language, earlier is better. So why aren't second languages taught in every preschool and primary grade to take advantage of young children's natural capacity to pick them up?

Good question. As with so much these days, the answer lies at least partly in financing. Early foreign language instruction, like art and music, may be deemed nonessential when it comes to funding. As a result, many children will take their first foreign language class in middle school or even high school, just as their windows of opportunity slam shut.

There are exceptions. Private schools usually start foreign language instruction in early grades. Many public elementary schools offer languages, too, sometimes as an afterschool fee-charging activity taught once or twice a week by an outside contractor like Berlitz For Kids.

In fact, California ranks among the top five states in the percentage of public primary schools offering foreign language programs. According to the National Education Association, California also leads the nation in cutting-edge elementary school immersion programs, which, as we'll see below, are the most effective for producing fluent speakers. Finally, privately funded "Saturday schools" offer another avenue for early language study.

Let's briefly summarize the science behind the "earlier is better" conclusion. Then, in case you don't understand why your 4-year-old should speak, say, Mandarin when you don't, we'll look at the overall benefits of foreign language acquisition. We'll see how language is taught and explore your options for taking advantage of your child's optimum language-learning years.

### The Brain and Language Acquisition

The "window of opportunity" idea is widely accepted. Here is a very simplified explanation: From birth until puberty, the brain literally formats itself to perform various specialized functions, such as language, based upon the input it gets from the world. Neural networks gradually form, and they function more and more efficiently as they are used. If a second language is part of that input, networks for understanding and using it 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 additional learning in the second and first languages.

This "formatting" process, especially active in the first six years, ends at puberty, or around age 12, and the brain begins to shed connections it no longer uses. The capacity to distinguish and make sounds not encountered in languages the child speaks diminishes or disappears.

Many scientists believe that a newborn's brain is genetically "programmed" to learn language, just as a bird is programmed to sing or a spider to weave a web. No one actually teaches a child to talk. Rather, parents and others enable her learning by speaking while they interact with her. The interaction is a critical part of this process; merely hearing TV or radio is not enough by itself.

Baby talk by adults is part of this interaction. It involves simple sentence structure and vocabulary, exaggerated intonation and sounds, repetition, and questions, all of which help a child sort out meanings, sounds, and sentence patterns of a language.

During this early period, two languages can be learned simultaneously as long as the child regularly interacts with speakers of both languages.

Pronunciation is more like that of a native speaker when language study begins early. Some experts believe this is due in part to physiological changes at puberty; by age 15, a child's facial muscles and bones are nearly mature, and his musculature loses sensitivity to phonetic distinctions that are not relevant to the languages he speaks. It is simply harder for the older student to make new, unfamiliar sounds. A psychological factor may also be at work: Older children are more inhibited in trying out new sounds and more concerned about making mistakes.

## **Why Should Your Child Learn a Foreign Language?**

Isn't English enough? After all, much of the world's population speaks it as a second language, so your child can probably get by with English alone. Why add more academic study to his life?

These are legitimate questions, but the answers all favor introducing your kid to a second language as early as possible, preferably in an "immersion" program. The Bay Area offers many reasonably priced schools and classes and which language you choose may not really matter, since studying any one of them provides benefits. Let's take a look at a few of them.

- Acquiring a language is effortless for a young child. Getting him into a class early allows easy, natural absorption of a second language through play and exploration. I, for one, can vouch for the fact that starting Spanish in tenth grade is not effortless. Save your kid the struggle.
- Improvement of overall academic performance. Statistically, children who study a second language score higher on verbal standardized tests conducted in English, according to the College Entrance Examination Board. Language students also perform better in math and logic skills than children with just one language. There is also some evidence that foreign language students are more creative and better at solving complex problems.
- Likewise, Chris Clark, director of Contra Costa's immersion preschool, Kids Into Speaking Spanish (KISS), notes that "no one expects the very young to master complex points of grammar, but the program seeks to make the children open to exploring other languages and cultures, Spanish or otherwise."
- Retention of family heritage, culture, and language as the younger generation assimilates into mainstream American culture.
- Ability to communicate with non-English speakers in travel abroad or at home. If your French, say, is weak, your fluent child can keep you from mistakenly ordering "a barrel of your house wine," as one of my friends did recently in Paris!

## How Foreign Languages are Taught at Home

Where at least one parent speaks another language, a young child can learn it easily and naturally at the same time he learns English. One parent speaks to him and demands responses in English only, and the other does the same in the target language. The child learns two languages simultaneously and magically absorbs the structure of each so that he does not mix them up. This method can also work with a nanny or babysitter who speaks to and interacts with the child only in the foreign language.

## And in Schools

There are three major types of language study programs in primary schools: FLES ("foreign language in elementary schools"), FLEX ("foreign language exploratory"), and immersion.

FLES is what comes to mind when you think of a traditional language class. Sometimes called "sequential," this method treats the foreign language as a separate subject, like math or reading, and meets for class from two to five days a week. Explanations may be in English, but the students hear, speak, and read the target language. Proficiency obviously depends to some extent on the frequency of classes, the opportunity to practice, and the accent of the teacher.

FLEX teaches language and its accompanying culture as a concept. Rather than trying to produce proficiency, the teacher emphasizes the nature of language, and he or she may explore one or more languages as examples. You shouldn't expect a child in a FLEX situation to become fluent, but the program can provide a basis for later learning and for appreciating other cultures.

Immersion programs come in three flavors: full, partial, and dual.

Full immersion produces the highest degree of second-language proficiency. In fact, Chris Clark of the KISS preschool, maintains that "a child can ... be bilingual by the end of one year" with full immersion. Using this method, children learn all their subjects—math, science, reading, social studies—in the target language, which is just the vehicle for teaching and is not taught as a separate subject. Curriculum with younger children focuses on games, songs, rhymes, cooking, holiday celebrations, and so on.

At each grade level, the percentage of time devoted to teaching in English increases, with the ultimate goal of instructing in each language half the time by around fifth grade. San Francisco's Alice Yu Alternative Elementary, for example, begins in kindergarten with about 85 percent of class time in Chinese and ends with 50 percent in fifth grade, at which point the students can communicate effectively in both languages. (Fortunately for these students, San Francisco has an immersion middle school where they can continue their studies.)

Full immersion was pioneered in Canada's bilingual (French/English) provinces and has been well studied for thirty years. Children in immersion programs do not experience any long-term delay in speaking English, but they do suffer an initial, temporary lag in English achievement. Research also shows that, ultimately, immersion students do as well as or better than other students on math and verbal skills.

In Canada, immersion programs have begun as late as grades 4, 7, and 9, but overall achievement levels of these students were lower than those of children who started younger. In the U.S., most immersion programs begin in preschool, kindergarten, or first grade. (Some, like Valley View Elementary School in Pleasanton, allow children to enroll as late as second grade, but only if they are native speakers of the non-English language.)

Immersion classes usually contain a mix of children whose families do and do not speak the second language at home. At KISS, for example, about two-thirds of the students come from non-Spanish-speaking families. Fifty-two percent of the families at the French American School speak only English, 28 percent speak French, and 20 percent speak a third language at home. Berkeley's Centro Latino, an afterschool program, says 99 percent of its parent population does not speak Spanish.

Partial immersion programs, as you might guess, teach only half of the curriculum in the foreign language, and reading and language arts are taught in English from the beginning. These students do not experience the same initial lag in English as total immersion students, researchers say, but partial immersion is not quite as effective in producing foreign language proficiency. Nevertheless, the students do absorb accent and vocabulary and obtain the other benefits of language study.

"Dual," "mutual," or "two-way" immersion is designed for schools with a large percentage of children whose mother tongue is, say, Spanish. Half the class time is in Spanish, thus "immersing" the English speakers, and half is in English, immersing the Spanish speakers.

## **Home Schooling**

Home schoolers face a problem if there is no native speaker of the second language in the house, as the child needs to hear correct native pronunciation. Audio or video tapes may help. The Muzzy films, produced by the BBC Language Course for Kids in various languages, constitute one of the world's most respected children's language courses. Its mix of video, audio, and CD-ROM is formulated for the childhood brain, ages 1 to 10 ([www.early-advantage.com](http://www.early-advantage.com)).

The Rosetta Stone software packages, (800) 788- 0822, provide interactive elements. You can buy or download this and other language software on the internet. Following are some useful sites:

- [www.gomilpitas.com/homeschooling](http://www.gomilpitas.com/homeschooling) (free trials of language learning software).
- [www.speakeasy.org](http://www.speakeasy.org).
- [www.geocities.com/jardinresources/resources/recursos.htm](http://www.geocities.com/jardinresources/resources/recursos.htm).
- [www.californiahomeschool.net/resources/subjects/foreign.asp](http://www.californiahomeschool.net/resources/subjects/foreign.asp).

## **Saturday Schools**

Despite the label, Saturday schools sometimes meet on Sundays or on weekdays after school, usually for one to five hours a week. Most operate during the school year and cost in the neighborhood of \$200 a semester.

When looking at Saturday schools, you need to distinguish between two types.

One seems to be aimed at children who already speak the foreign language or are in danger of forgetting it for lack of practice. The school provides the child with a place to speak her native tongue and remember its culture, and classes may not be set up for teaching a child who speaks only English.

Other Saturday schools do teach beginners, and kids are usually grouped by age and level of proficiency.

## **The Right Instruction for Your Child**

Your child's age will play a part in deciding what is right for him, since most full immersion programs start in preschool or kindergarten. Look for full immersion if your child is young enough and your goals are fluency and impeccable foreign accent. Ask yourself if you are comfortable with her learning to read first in a foreign language. If not, look for partial immersion, FLES, or FLEX programs, or Saturday schools. A Saturday program can serve your purposes if you want your child to be exposed to another culture and get some of the benefits of language study. This may be your only choice if you can't find a beginners' class for his age group or you want him to learn a particular language not taught in local schools.

If English is new to your child or you don't speak it at home, perhaps you want a dual immersion program where he can refine his English.

Meet the people who actually teach the children and, because accent is all-important, make certain they are native speakers. Watch some classes. These should be lively and interesting and address a variety of learning styles by incorporating speaking, listening, games, music, movement, visual aids, and reading and writing (where appropriate to grade level).

If your child is a rank beginner and is beyond early primary grades, finding a beginner's language course can be tricky. Karl Pfeiffer, the head of the German School of the East Bay (GSEB), told me, "One of the most complex challenges for all Saturday schools is to create somewhat homogeneous classes in terms of age and proficiency while trying to get the best possible educational experience for the students.

"At the GSEB, we take the following approach: At the kindergarten entry level, we have two tracks: one for (near) native speakers ages 4 to 5 with high fluency in German, and one for non-native speakers with no or some prior knowledge of German. The tracks are not completely separate; the children will meet during recess, at various events throughout the year, and often also outside of school in a neighborhood setting. Both tracks consist of two or three class groups according to age.

"By the time the children are about ten years old, both tracks will merge into common groups, one for preteens and one for teens.

"You may not find a beginner's class for an older child. He wouldn't be put with kindergartners, because the teaching approach is always geared towards a particular age group and their developmental stage. [A] fifth grader would feel uncomfortable with the 'baby games' of the kindergartners, and the kindergartners would feel uncomfortable with the 'big kid' among them."

In that case, the GSEB would suggest that the older child come back in her early teens, when she is old enough for the adult beginner classes.

If you don't find what you're looking for, take the initiative. For a Saturday school, consider recruiting enough kids of your child's age to make up a beginners' class. GSEB, for example, is open to creating beginners' classes on demand if there are sufficient numbers.

If your child's school has no language program, consult the principal and teachers for ideas on bringing one to the school. At my son's school, language instruction starts in second grade. Last year, however, a kindergarten mom familiar with the brain research initiated a request to add Spanish as a fee-based after-school activity for younger children and 100 percent of the kindergarten class enrolled.

On the other hand, some kids can't get enough of language. Although my 12-year-old son took FLEX- and FLES-style Spanish in elementary school with moderate interest, he fell in love with Latin and the idea of languages after a week in middle school. Now he's teaching himself Welsh with a computer program and an

<http://www.parentspress.com/edulanguages.html>

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