

Teaching Children a Second Language

Remember high school? You could choose French or Spanish. What you couldn't choose was to be the right age to learn a new language easily. You memorized verbs, but you probably didn't learn to speak fluently.

Today, enlightened school systems know better. Second languages are introduced in elementary school. Little kids do learn more easily than high school students.

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But current research says to really do it right, start even earlier. Start when the child is learning a first language. Babies have an astonishing ability to absorb. And in today's complex world, a second language is not a luxury — it's a necessity.

We know now that studying a second language offers surprising benefits to children. Research has demonstrated improved ability to communicate, better cognitive development, richer cultural awareness and, ultimately, better job opportunities for those who know a second language.

What's more, today's children will all be required to have command of two languages by the time they reach college.

"Research suggests that from birth through eight to 10 years of age is the best time to introduce new languages to a young child. Yet, for some reason, most school systems introduce a new language around age 12," comments Beth Butler, creator of the BOCA BETH Program, an integrated program of bilingual educational materials. "If you introduce a new language early in life, children will learn it faster, retain it better and most often speak it with near-native pronunciation."

"There are two ways to learn a new language," says Butler. "Bilingual education — teaching English and Spanish side-by-side — is the best way to work with small children. For adults, immersion — where the new language is spoken exclusively — is usually the only way to learn. This is why language summer camps work for teens.

"But when you're working with babies and little children, the bilingual approach is more effective, because it provides continuing education in the child's native tongue while acquiring skills in the new one. Children develop a sense of pride in learning both languages. The bilingual method ultimately provides better retention. And it's a whole lot more fun." ♥