

Bilingual Babies!

Teaching Your Child a Foreign Language

By Katherine Bontrager

According to the 2000 U.S. Census, 18 percent of U.S. residents speak a language other than English in the home, an increase of 75 percent since 1990. The numbers are staggering, though most don't need statistics to understand that the world is getting smaller with each passing day. Learning a second language has become a requirement within many educational institutions, a necessity for businesses large and small and a key to a variety of cultures and countries.

It can also be a difficult struggle - unless you happen to be a 3-year-old. Strange but true: Your newborn has a better chance of becoming fluent in a second language than many highly educated adults.

Primed for Learning

"Between birth and age 8, your child's brain is uniquely hard-wired to absorb languages and to learn to pronounce words with a native accent," says Stacy DeBroff, mother of two and author of *The Mom Book: 4,278 Tips for Moms by Moms* (Free Press 2002). "Children learn languages very differently from adults, with studies finding that children even store a second language in a different area of the brain." DeBroff, a former Harvard lawyer who also runs Mom Central, Inc. and the www.momcentral.com Web site, understands the benefits of children learning foreign languages on a neurological level as well as a social one.

DeBroff says it is never too early to start teaching children a foreign language. When most parents are concerned only with comprehension of English, they fail to understand just how incredibly children's brains function. "The earlier children start learning a second language, the better, even as early as 1 year old," she says. "Many teachers and linguists recommend starting the language learning process as soon as possible, even before children become verbal in their first language. Even though children are not speaking at that point, they are actively absorbing and processing language."

Help With English

[The] fear that Spanish would only serve to confuse [the child's] understanding of English is a common worry. However, DeBroff says the lessons learned in another language may help youngsters to grasp the first. "Parents may wonder whether learning a second language before your child has yet to fully

master English will detract from his learning ability," she says. "To the contrary, learning the roots and structure of a second language typically enhances your child's English. As long as children hear these languages methodically and regularly, they can learn more than one simultaneously." Learning a second language can help children grow and develop in cognitive, language and social development, DeBroff says. The more language learning there is, the more cognitive development there is. "The more languages a child is learning in the early years, the longer it will take him to speak, but once he starts speaking, he will speak in all the languages he knows," she says. "The receptive learning part of the language development process takes longer because the understanding process of two or more languages takes longer. Socially the child is enhanced, because he will be able to relate to people from different cultures. He will acquire more experience with different kinds of people ... It is important to understand how truly beneficial it will be for their child to speak and understand easily and comfortably in more than one language."

"By 6 months, children in English-speaking households already have developed different auditory maps, shown by electrical measurements, that identify which neurons respond to different sounds, from those in Swedish-speaking homes," she says. "This is why learning a second language after, rather than with, the first is so difficult. The auditory map of the first language restricts the learning of a second language."

DeBroff says that while children engage in fun activities in a foreign language, such as singing, story telling or cooking projects, they naturally take in and start to use the new language comfortably and effortlessly. But this natural talent for learning language has a shelf life. As children approach puberty, neural connections develop, and the nature of language learning and storage changes becoming less flexible, DeBroff says.

"Between the ages of 8 and 12, studies have shown that children lose the ability to hear and reproduce new sounds resulting in a foreign-sounding accent in a second language learned," she says.

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