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Lifelong benefits of learning a second language young

By April Scarlett

Enough research (<http://www.cal.org/resources/digest/ncrcds04.html>) has been done over a long enough period of time to show there is absolutely a significant life-long benefit for children who learn a second, or even third, language at a very young age. Universities like Oxford, Cornell (<http://www.news.cornell.edu/stories/May09/bilingual.kids.sl.html>) and Cambridge have done intensive studies, and their conclusions are all in alignment. Bilingual children experience greater academic success, self-confidence and cultural sensitivity throughout their lives.



April Scarlett | Contributor

According to the Language League (<http://www.languageleague.com/whyLearnYoung.php>), there are the “5 C’s” of early language learning. They are: capture the critical period, craft cognitive skills, cultivate self-confidence, celebrate cultural understanding and create a world of possibility.

Jiemin Jacobson, owner of Saline’s Children’s Creative Learning Center (<http://www.childrenscreativelearningcenter.com/>), believes so much in the importance of a second language at an early age, she has decided to make learning Chinese part of their everyday curriculum, with no additional tuition.

“We don’t want any child to not be able to learn such an important skill because of their inability to pay.” Jacobson suggests her preschoolers already benefit from a strong literacy foundation, so the addition of a second language will contribute to academic success in the future. Studies indicate children who are bilingually fluent do better on SAT, ACT and other college assessment tests.

Research shows the ideal time to learn a second language is from birth to about age 10 or 12. A child’s brain is still developing language skills at a young age and will literally create “more room” to support the second language as it develops. Learning a second language after this

developmental phase is still possible, but new “space” has to be created to house the new skills. Learning a second language early is like realizing you need to add on an addition to your house while still in the building phase, instead of after construction is complete.

This idea refutes the common misunderstanding that a second language is confusing to children who are learning it before their home language is mastered. Young brains have the ability to compartmentalize as needed during development, storing the two languages equally.

A study conducted at the Cornell Language Acquisition Lab (CLAL) (<http://www.news.cornell.edu/stories/May09/bilingual.kids.sl.html>), concluded children who learn a second language can maintain attention despite outside stimuli better than children who know only one language. This is the skill needed for a person to be able to achieve goals in the presence of distraction, which is important throughout many aspects of academic success.

Parents are increasingly realizing the benefit their children can reap from the exposure to other languages and cultures. “We’ve added the second language classes to our summer program for school age children too,” Jacobson said. “The need is great, and the time is now, while they are still young.”

Combine all of the research and reports and the outcome is similar. Any newly acquired skill, like the mastery of a second language, will bring about a feeling of self-confidence and pride, especially if a child has mastered a skill his parent does not have. This adds to the spirit of independence and even empowerment. Socially, fluency in another language allows children to be more open and understanding to other cultures. And, academically, learning a second language will ensure a competitive edge in the global marketplace of his or her future.

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