

Top 10 Benefits of Early Language Learning

Learning a new language at any age is an enormously rewarding experience in many ways. While language learning is an enriching experience for all ages, children have the most to gain from this wonderful adventure. Quite simply, starting early offers the widest possible set of benefits and opportunities.

Children understand intuitively that language is something to explore, to play around with, and to enjoy. Their enthusiasm is both infectious and effective. The quickness with which they pick up their first language is nearly miraculous—and such a joy to watch as a parent. As children grow, all parents can attest to how much fun their children continue to have as they sing new words they hear and even invent new ones with a huge, bright smile. The joy with which children explore their first language makes childhood the ideal time for a second language—even if all the other reasons for an early start didn't exist!

But there are many other reasons, and while this list does not exhaust the number and variety of advantages starting a language early can provide, these are some of the most notable benefits.

Higher test scores: Numerous reports have proven that students who have studied a foreign language perform much better than their monolingual peers on many standardized tests, including all sections of the SAT. In fact, the 2007 College Bound Seniors report, issued by the College Board, which administers the SAT, vividly demonstrates the significant benefits of studying a foreign language. The report shows that students with 4 or more years of foreign language study score on average 140 points higher (out of 800!) than students with half a year or less experience on the Critical Reading section, and almost another 140 in the Math section and over 150 points higher on Writing.

Better and more advanced reading skills: A study undertaken by York University in Canada suggests that bilingual children's knowledge of a second language gives them an advantage in learning to read. Their ability to apply the insights and experiences of one language to the other as well as their wider experience of language gives them a big leg up. As they grow older, this advantage continues and grows. Plus, being able to read two languages is pretty impressive all by itself!

Greater confidence: Children are always discovering new things, but learning a new language is a uniquely rewarding experience—at any age. For children, the feeling of accomplishment that comes with their first steps toward a second language can spur them on to a deeper and broader passion for learning in general. And because children are at a special "window of opportunity" in which language learning is intuitive and natural, the ease and pleasure of the experience may boost their confidence and their desire for new discoveries.

Gives brains a boost: In a recent article in *The New Yorker*, Malcolm Gladwell quotes James Flynn, a renowned scientist, as saying "The mind is much more like a muscle than we've ever realized... It needs to get cognitive exercise. It's not some piece of clay on which you put an indelible mark." Research into the effects of bilingualism on children suggests that exposure to more than one language is an excellent way of flexing those brain muscles—and building them up too! Bilingual children in one study reported in *Nature* showed a significantly larger density of "grey matter" in their brains. And those who had been exposed to a second language from an early age proved to have the most grey matter of all. Grey matter is responsible for processing information, including memory, speech and sensory perception. And if it can be increased by exposure to a second language, then language learning would be just like taking your brain to the gym!

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Natural-sounding, native-like accent: Children are always mimicking what they hear, and are surprisingly good at it! They are uniquely attuned to slight differences in tone and sound. Their sensitive ears help them pick up on and duplicate the tricky sounds adults and even adolescents often stumble over. For adults just beginning a new language, this difficulty can be discouraging—trying to speak Spanish like Antonio Banderas from *Evita* only to end up sounding like Jack Black in *Nacho Libre* isn't exactly the best language experience. A study conducted by researchers from UCLA and the University of Hong Kong, however, shows that even adults with significant exposure to a language in childhood can end up speaking like a native. By starting early, your children can speak smoothly and confidently from the first.

Greater opportunities for college and careers: Colleges now place an increasingly high value on knowledge of more than one language. As the admissions process becomes more competitive across the board, knowing a second or a third language adds a new dimension to an applicant's resume. And as the economy becomes more and more globalized, English-only becomes less and less of an option.

Bigger view of the world: Traveling abroad is an experience which can benefit anyone, offering not just new sites to see, but new frames of mind and new perspectives. But going abroad and feeling comfortable in the language of your destination means you're doing more than just traveling—going from your home to another place, and then back home. You can feel as if you're a part of the culture and the life of this new world, as if you aren't a total stranger just visiting. Like reading a poem in another tongue you know, you will hear more than just the language—you will hear the music behind it as well, and the life.

Greater grasp of one's first language—including a bigger, richer vocabulary: Most of the time we use our first language with little thought to grammatical rules or constructions. This is perfectly natural, but the experience of learning a new language can bring greater understanding and perhaps even better grammar to our first language. Knowing the way another language works encourages us to examine our own language's mechanics in a positive way. By being able to compare the two, we learn more than we ever would as a monolingual. Or as Nancy Rhodes, Director of Foreign Language Education at the Center for Applied Linguistics in Washington, DC says, "The more children learn about a foreign language, the more they understand about their own language." Children use what they learn in one language to reinforce concepts and terms they've learned in the other. They can solidify their gains in their native tongue by matching them to their new adventures in another language.

Building and keeping cultural connections: Some of us are lucky enough to have a relative who still speaks their mother tongue frequently. To be able to communicate with them in that language builds a bridge—not only to that person, but to the heritage and history they represent. To maintain that connection keeps alive so much—memories, stories and traditions—and brings to life new memories, stories and traditions as well.

An all-family activity: Modern life is hectic; its demands are frequent and often contradictory. Learning a language together as a family provides a unifying activity which doesn't require you to drive your kids anywhere, and doesn't make it necessary to be in ten places at once. Starting this process early with your child or children provides your family with an activity and an experience it can return to and grow with over the years.

Your child and your family will benefit—in these ways and others—from learning a second language. You will find new and even unique uses; opportunities and ideas open up as you adapt your language learning process to you and your child's needs and aspirations. Starting now means the possibilities are wide open!

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