

Ten Fantastic Reasons to Begin Learning a Language Now

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Learning a new language at any age offers enormous opportunities and enjoyment. While language learning can be rewarding at any stage of life, children have the most to gain from this brilliant experience. To put it simply, starting a language early on offers the broadest possible array of benefits and opportunities.

Children know naturally and intuitively that language is an open invitation for exploration, a playground, and a pleasure. They are enthusiastic, and their exuberance is catching. They pick up their first language rapidly, at a nearly miraculous rate—and their parents love to watch them grow. All parents know how happy their children are as they sing new words they hear and even invent new ones, saying everything with a large, excited smile. Children love to explore their first language, and if for no other reason, that exuberance makes childhood the ideal time for a second language.

There are, however, many other reasons, and while we do not imagine we've exhausted the full list, here are a few 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. As the Lord Dearing Report showed in 2007, there is a significant advantage in terms of GCSE achievement for pupils who have studied at least one foreign language.

Improved reading skills

A study undertaken by York University in Canada suggests that knowledge of a second language gives bilingual children an advantage in learning to read. These children can apply the experiences and insights of one language to the other, and as they grow older, this advantage expands with their broader experience of language and the world. Additionally, the ability to read two languages is considerably impressive in and of itself!

Increased confidence

Children are continually learning new things, but exploring a new language is uniquely rewarding and thrilling. For children, the feeling of accomplishment that comes with their first steps toward a second language can ignite in them a deeper and broader passion for learning in general. And because children are at a special 'window of opportunity' in which they find language learning natural and intuitive, the pleasure and ease of the experience may boost their confidence and their desire for new adventures and new discoveries.

More brain-power

In a recent article in *The New Yorker*, James Flynn, a renowned scientist, is quoted as saying: The mind is much more like a muscle than we've ever realised... It needs to get cognitive exercise. It's not some piece of clay on which you put an indelible mark. Studies of the effects of bilingualism on children suggest that being exposed to more than one language provides a fantastic opportunity

for just such cognitive exercise. A significantly larger density of 'grey matter' in their brains was reported in bilingual children in one study published in *Nature*. In that study, the children who had experienced second language exposure from an early age proved to have the most grey matter of the children tested. Grey matter is active in the processing of information, including memory, speech and sensory perception. And if mere exposure to a second language leads to increased grey matter, then language learning offers a wonderful opportunity to flex those cognitive muscles.

Native-like, natural-sounding accent

Children frequently mimic what they hear, and they are surprisingly good at it! They are uniquely sensitive to slight differences in tone and sound. Their ears are well attuned to picking up on and duplicating the tricky sounds which adults and even adolescents often find tough to capture. For adults just beginning a new language, this difficulty can be trying. A study conducted by researchers from the University of California - Los Angeles and the University of Hong Kong, however, demonstrates that adults who had significant exposure to a second language in childhood—even if they never learnt to speak it—could end up speaking like a native. But you can be sure that by starting early, your child will develop into a smooth and confident speaker from the beginning.

Increased opportunities for university and careers

Universities today value knowledge of more than one language very highly. As competition for spots at the best institutions becomes more rigorous, having a second or third language can add a new dimension to an applicant's record. And as the economy becomes more and more globalised, English-only becomes less and less of an option.

Broader worldview

Traveling abroad is a fun and rewarding experience for everyone, offering not only new sites to see, but new perspectives and new frames of mind. But going abroad and being at ease in the language of your destination allows you to do more than just travelling—shuttling from your home to another place, and then back home. Knowing the language, you can feel as if you're a part of the culture and the life of this new world, as if you are more than a visitor. Much like reading a poem in another language you know, you can hear more than the words—you will also hear the music behind it, and the life.

Greater grasp of one's first language — including a larger, richer vocabulary

We rarely give much thought to grammatical rules or constructions when we use our first language. This is quite natural, but the experience of learning a new language can bring greater understanding and perhaps even better grammar to our first language. Understanding the way another language works encourages you to think about your own language's mechanics. If you are able to compare the two, you will learn more than you 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 the insights and skills they've acquired in one language to reinforce concepts and terms they've learnt in the other. They can consolidate what they've learnt in their native tongue by applying it to the exciting new words of their new one.

Forming and maintaining cultural connections

Some of us are fortunate enough to have a relative who speaks another language fluently. The ability to communicate with them in that language forms a connection—not only to that person, but to the heritage and history they represent. Maintaining that connection keeps many things

alive—memories, stories and traditions—and brings to life new memories, stories and traditions as well.

An activity for the whole family

Life today is hectic; so much is demanded of us, and it can be difficult to do everything. Learning a language together as a family provides a unifying activity which doesn't require you to be in ten places at once. Starting this process early with your child or children will allow your family to share an experience which will grow with you over the years.

Your child and your family will benefit — in these ways and others — from learning a second language. You will discover original and even unique opportunities, adaptations and ideas for using your child's new language. You will discover and maybe even invent ways to adapt your family's language learning process to your and your child's needs and aspirations. Starting now means the sky is the limit!

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