

Is There a Best Age for Learning a Second Language?

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ABSTRACT

Do you hope for your child to have access to ideas and perspectives from another language? Do you dream of your son effortlessly switching between different languages as you sip Prosecco overlooking an Italian sunset? Do you daydream about visiting London or USA with a daughter who can negotiate like a local?

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Great! Then when should you start encouraging them to start learning a foreign language? Is it as soon as they can talk, or should you hold off until they have mastered English?

Well, all researchers agree that the earlier a child starts learning a second language, the better, for more reasons than one. Some researchers say that second language acquisition skills peak at or before the age of 6 or 7. Others claim that this window extends through puberty. But, they all agree that it's much harder for a child beyond puberty to learn a new language. Below, you will find all prevailing viewpoints and their backup arguments for your reference as a means to help you make the most informed decision possible

Why start at the age of 3 or 4? If you asked that question some years ago, everybody would look at you as if you were an alien. It was inconceivable for children as young as three years of age to be able to learn a second language, given that they have not yet mastered their mother tongue.

Nowadays, though, research findings indicate something totally different. Studies by Harvard University confirm that the creativity, critical

thinking skills, and flexibility of the mind are significantly enhanced if children learn a second language at a younger age. Preschool years, especially the first three years of life, are believed to be a vital period in a child's life. This is when the foundations for attitudes, thinking, and learning, among others, are laid down.

Using that natural ability is much encouraged because learning a second language is as easy as learning the first. It may sound like a huge burden, but, in fact, it's not. The human brain is a wonderful thing. From the moment we are born, we learn by six main methods:

- Sight
- Taste
- Smell
- Sound
- Touch
- Doing.

Based on the information we gain in our first few years, everything we have learned grows later in life. Research has shown that 50% of our ability to learn is developed by age 4 and another 30% by age 8. This is why three-year-olds are encouraged to learn a second language. However, this doesn't mean that 80% of

one's knowledge or intelligence is formed before they are 8 years old. It simply means that children develop their main learning pathways during their first few years of life

Why learn at early adolescence (11-13 years of age)? A study of 17,000 British children learning French at school has shown that children who had started learning at the age of eleven performed better at second language proficiency tests, compared to those that had started at around eight years of age. So far, that particular study is the largest one of children learning a foreign language in a classroom setting, ever. These findings were consistent with those of other studies of Uzbek students learning English and Swiss children learning language.

Also, it has been found that adolescents who learn a foreign language before they turn 15 have a better pronunciation of the second language, which is described as almost native-like. Again, though, the younger they start learning the second language, the more they develop a native-like accent. On the other hand, children older than 15, as well as adults, are found to be better at learning a new language than younger children. This is because there are experiential and cognitive limitations in young children that adolescents and adults don't have, which allows them to learn faster. In this case, if the first language hasn't been developed properly and the child was forced to learn a second one, there are dangers that should be avoided. In fact, this is a natural form of using the language among people that learn two languages and is perceived as a complex, yet rich, form of discourse. Yes, you may come across viewpoints that condemn code-switching coming from education and health professionals that see it as a hurdle to the language development of children. Yet evidence shows that all bilingual speakers (no matter their age) code-switch from time to time, which is not an indication of language disorder or confusion.

When it comes to pre-schoolers who learn a second language, they can code-switch for a plethora of

reasons. Given that bilingual children are usually not equally proficient in both languages, they will switch while having a conversation with others. They will, sometimes, select words they are more familiar with, regardless of which language they come from. This, of course, results in mixing up words from both languages in a sentence. It should also be noted that bilingual children (even two-year-olds) are remarkably familiar with the language preferences of the person they are having a conversation with. This makes them perfectly capable of using the best of both languages to deliver their message to their peers. So, it's not uncommon to see bilingual children using the language their conversation partner is best fond of!

Once they reach the age of four, bilingual children are more aware of which language to use in the community and public places. You can also expect them to have developed sufficient vocabulary in both their mother tongue and second language and be more able to sustain a conversation in one language, rather than code-switching. Clearly, small children are miraculous language learners with great potential and abilities we parents don't believe they can have at such young age!

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