



NO TIME LIKE THE PRESENT TO LEARN A LANGUAGE

BY MAGGIE O'NEILL • MONEILL@RGJ.COM • DECEMBER 23, 2008

It was a different thing to do.

But it would be worth it, figured Henry Thurston-Griswold, a Spanish professor at Juniata College in Huntingdon, Penn.

After his first and then second child were born, he began speaking to them solely in Spanish, leaving his wife and the community to handle the English angle.

“From the time they were really small, I have used Spanish exclusively with them,” he said.

Even though initially they spoke back to him in English, the one-way exposure allowed them to begin recognizing vocabulary and hear the inner workings of Spanish.

It was the constant exposure at home, and sabbatical trips to countries where Spanish was the native tongue and his children were completely immersed, that “made it possible for them now to have a very strong proficiency,” he said.

It actually was a trip to Guatemala that forced his daughter Kate, at the age of 3, to begin using Spanish. The Thurston-Griswolds were staying with a host family that included four little girls, none of whom spoke English. One day when talking about princesses, Kate “realized that English didn’t cut it and switched to Spanish,” he said.

Will is almost 12 now, and Kate is 10.

While not every parent knows a second language or can take their children out of the country, there are alternatives. Instead, Thurston-Griswold says children can be put in situations where they can interact with children fluent in another language. It may be a difficult thing to do, but it’s possible, even probable there are children in your neighborhood that speak another language. Natural exposure allows children to pick up nuances and idioms that otherwise will take longer to learn.

Why a second language?

One reason to expose your child to a second or even third language at an early age is so the child can avoid the difficulties of learning it when they are older.

“I had to do it the hard way,” said Thurston-Griswold, who didn’t begin to learn Spanish until ninth grade.

Waiting until middle school for a child to begin learning a language essentially puts them in a position of catch-up, said Dr. Naomi Steiner, a developmental-behavioral pediatrician at Tufts Medical Center Boston and author of the just-released book “7 Steps to Raising A Bilingual Child.” It can take a middle-school student three years to learn what a young child can learn in one year with daily exposure, she said. High school can even be a more difficult time to learn because it requires self-motivation and dedication at a time when classes and activities are competing for attention.

Another reason to learn a second language is that research shows that children exposed to a second language perform better academically. The reasoning is that languages help to improve abstract thinking. Thinking of words and thinking of sounds is abstract cognition and might even help improve learning in abstract subject areas, such as math.

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A third reason is that the world is a global community and knowing a second language is becoming more and more important.

Finally, the top reason to expose a child a second language is that the brain is like a sponge, especially under the age of five, and picking up and interpreting outside stimuli. A toddler's brain "is more plastic and more malleable and more able to suck in the information from the outside" that it ever will be again, Steiner said.

Learn in context

But learning a language doesn't happen "Bingo, like that," she said.

It takes repetition and exposure in a natural setting. And even though a child might not begin responding for some time, there still is much going on language-wise.

"(A child) can still understand a lot and take in a lot," she said. "The fact that she doesn't speak (the second language), doesn't say she can't learn it."

It's even better if the learning can take place in context. Try telling your children the word for popcorn, for example, when they are eating it, so that an instant connection is made. Pointing and gesturing helps with learning too, especially at a young age, she said.

"Raising a child to be bilingual is a parenting decision," Steiner said.

She suggests setting apart time each day to expose a child to a second language. This can be done by actually sitting down and writing up a "bilingual plan" for the week. Doing this will make you more likely to follow through. A weekly plan can include exposure through a video, a computer game, children's music or reading. It does not have to be the same thing every day. Planned activities twice a day, say in the morning and in the afternoon, will make learning go even faster.

"The more you're going to do it, the faster it will go, the more vocabulary (your children) will learn, the more (they'll) be able to put it into sentences and speak," Steiner said.

It can take some time for children to begin responding in the second language. More than likely, the first thing to be said will be frequent sentences you have repeated. It will be a special moment when your child says "por favor Mama" or something similar for the first time, Steiner said.

First language at risk?

Children can learn more than one language without putting the dominant one at risk, Steiner said.

"The rest of the community that is around her is going to be speaking her (dominant) language intensely," she said. "What's important is to have good language input. That's why we talk so much about reading to children and exposing them to good kinds of stimulation. As long as you're giving her that solid language input, she will progress with both languages, main and dominant."

A child who learns to speak a language fluently as a youngster can take advanced placement classes or challenge classes upon reaching middle school and high school. Steiner strongly recommends that the child use the time to begin learning a third language, which likely will be acquired even faster than the second.

However, Steiner is one who believes that young children should have plenty of free time and not be overexposed to activity. But the value of learning a second language is too important to skip.

It might mean "less chess" or "no CSI camp," she said. "It is one area where parents are going to have to prioritize. (Language) is one way to actually help get your brain in movement. Children are learning a culture here. It's multi-faceted, and you are opening the doors."