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Why, How, and When Should My Child Learn a Second Language?*

By Viva el Español, Spanish Language Center

Much attention has been focused on the importance of early foreign language learning. Some research reports that younger children learn languages better than older children and adults. With so many demands already placed on children, parents ask, Is it important that my child learn a second language at a young age? If so, why? What can I do to help my child learn a language? What program options are available?

What are the benefits of knowing a second language?

In addition to developing a lifelong ability to communicate with people from other countries and backgrounds, other benefits include improved overall school performance and superior problem-solving skills.

Students of foreign languages tend to score higher on standardized tests. Results from the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) show that students who had studied a foreign language for four or more years outscored other students on the verbal and math portions of the test.

Knowledge of a second language also seems to coincide with high academic achievement. One study shows that students who were in "rigorous" programs in high school, which included three years of foreign language study, were likely to earn better grades in college and less likely to drop out.

Learning another language can enhance knowledge of English structure and vocabulary.

Students of foreign languages may have better career opportunities. In a survey of 581 alumni of The American Graduate School of International Management in Glendale, AZ, most respondents said

they had gained a competitive advantage from their knowledge of foreign languages and other cultures. They said that not only was language study often a critical factor in hiring decisions and in enhancing their career paths, it also provided personal fulfillment, mental discipline, and cultural enlightenment.

The benefits to society are many. Americans fluent in other languages improve global communication, enhance our economic competitiveness abroad, and maintain our political and security interests. In recent years, the U.S. government has expressed a need for fluent speakers of languages other than English, particularly in less commonly taught languages such as Arabic and Chinese.

Is younger really better?

Learning a language at any age is beneficial. Some studies have shown that

the human brain is more open to linguistic development during the years between birth and pre-adolescence and that children who learn a language before the onset of adolescence are more likely to develop native-like pronunciation. When children have an early start to a long sequence of language instruction that continues through high school and college, they will be able to achieve levels of fluency that have not been possible in the past due to the late start of most language programs. At the same time, older children and adults can still be successful at learning a second language, although the level of attainment may be less predictable because of factors that can influence language learning. Any exposure to a second language and culture is beneficial, even if native-like proficiency is not the goal or the outcome.

What options are available in our area?

The types of language programs available can be placed on a continuum. At one end of the continuum are immersion programs, which offer the greatest amount of time in language study and produce students with the highest levels of proficiency. At the other end are programs that explore language and do not have language proficiency as a goal.

¡Viva el Español! is a non-profit Spanish Language and Culture Center serving children and adults in the East Bay. All of our classes use a full-immersion approach. We believe that learning a foreign language in the pre-school and elementary school years is an essential part of a child's education and development. Today's children need to be prepared to live and work in a global context.

We are a before and after school program, and teach Spanish to young *amigos* in pre-school through grade 8. Our teachers are native Spanish speakers with extensive experience teaching kids. We have a terrific curriculum in place. We sing, dance, cook, paint, read stories, and play games with kids, all in Spanish! We are located in Lafayette, with convenient access from Highway 24. Give your child the gift of foreign language! Join us to sing, read stories and paint in *español*!

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