

Everyone Should Teach Their Child a Second Language

A disproportionate number of our students are from local immersion schools where they are being immersed in Mandarin or Spanish. Families often come to us because their children are "behind" in English and/or Math due to the extra academic burdens of learning a second language. Typically the same school that is immersing their child in two languages will also complain that the student is behind the norm in their English language skills. This is because the school district does not give an allowance for bilingual students to take longer in their language development, even though it will be far deeper and more profound than that of a mono-lingual student. Bilingual students are supposed to learn at the same rate as mono-lingual students. As a result many families get stressed by the experience, and we've even seen a few pull their children out of immersion in order to "catch-up" in English. This is a mistake. Bilingual students soon catch-up and gallop ahead in their language skills. The benefits of bilingualism are so strong and pervasive that we should likely require all schools to immerse children in more than one language.

Bilingual Students are More Intelligent

The research clearly shows that a bilingual child is smarter than they would have been if they only learnt one language. Teaching your child two languages will make them more intelligent, which could lead to more success in education, which generally leads to a richer life in all respects. Students who learn more than one language typically take longer to develop their reading and writing skills, but they also emerge slightly later with a much stronger intuitive understanding of language in general. Bilingualism encourages greater brain growth and grey matter that has many positive spillovers. These range from far better resistance to Alzheimer's and dementia in old age to higher standardized test scores. Bilingualism leads to your child being more intelligent than they would otherwise have been.

Empathy to Other Cultures

Learning a second language also helps one better understand and empathize with other cultures and people. Language leads to implicit differences in how cultures and societies see the world. The way we speak shapes how we think, and reflects our priorities and interests. For instance a study of the Sami language of Norway, Sweden,

and Finland found 180 words for snow and 1,000 words for reindeer! Snow and reindeer are obviously important in the Sami world. There are also more subtle differences. For instance English prefers strict logic when it comes to negatives (e.g. there isn't anyone here), whereas Spanish prefers to double the negatives for added emphasis (e.g. there isn't no-one here!). Logically English is more correct, but Spanish may express the idea more quickly and clearly. These are the implicit cultural differences that language can reveal.

More obviously and explicitly, speaking a second language will allow your child to directly speak with and connect to people from other cultures. The very act of making the effort to speak to someone in their native tongue also buys much goodwill, and can very quickly open many doors. Your child will be able to speak to someone from a different cultural background and learn how they see things. Taking both the explicit and implicit advantages together, your child's empathy and understanding for others can only increase with language. Empathy is the cornerstone of emotional intelligence.

Which Language? How about Spanish?

If you don't know which language to teach your child, I suggest that you teach them Spanish. It should come as no surprise to anyone who lives in the area that Los Angeles has the highest population of Hispanics of any City in the United States. Almost half of Los Angeles is Hispanic, and the vast majority speak Spanish (earlier Hispanic generations often deliberately failed to teach their children Spanish in order to encourage faster assimilation, so some do not speak Spanish). A large minority of Hispanics in Los Angeles do not speak English well. It thus seems crazy that Spanish is not a required language in all schools in the area. Speaking only Spanish or only English locks you out of the full, rich cultural and economic experience that is Los Angeles. If you raise your children in Los Angeles, you should seriously consider teaching them Spanish so that they can gain access to more of the opportunities here. In addition, Mexico is increasingly successful and could present great future opportunities, and it is only a two hour drive away. Speaking Spanish allows your child to more fully live in Los Angeles.

Spanish and Romance Languages

Learning Spanish makes it much easier to learn other Romantic languages such as Italian, French, and Portuguese. This is because all these languages share common historical origins. Therefore learning Spanish will allow them to much more easily learn a third or a fourth language if they choose.

Spanish and the World

Spanish is also very widely spoken in the world. It is in fact the second most widely spoken language in terms of native speakers (second only to Mandarin), with around 500 million people speaking it. Spanish is more widely spread than Mandarin though, and is the primary language of around 20 countries. Speaking Spanish will open many doors in many places.

Any Second Language is Good

Regardless of which second language you choose, your child will derive many benefits from learning a second language. They will be more intelligent, more empathetic, and gain more access to the opportunities of our local and global world. Teaching your child a second language is likely the single most important thing you could do to help them be more successful in life.