

# Bilingual benefits not just talk

By Heidi Stevens  
Tribune reporter

One of my favorite moments with my daughter took place last summer at our neighborhood playground.

June and another little girl were sharing the sandbox, while I dove into that uniquely awkward ritual of chatting with the other grown-up.

The other grown-up, though, spoke mostly Chinese, so we relied on lots of smiles and nodding.

The girls, meanwhile, moved on to snack time, quietly trading and tasting each other's little treats. They became instant pals, climbing the equipment together and huddling inside the play hut to dine together in comfortable silence.

It was sweet and innocent, and it felt, somehow, momentous.

I, of course, felt like a smiling, nodding idiot. Not only do I not speak a word of Chinese, I don't speak (or understand) French, Spanish, Russian, Italian or any of the other languages we encounter regularly in our little corner of the world. My high school German gets me through the occasional crossword puzzle, but that's about it. It's a deficiency I don't plan to pass on to June.

So when is the right time to introduce a foreign language, and what's the best way to go about it? We called on a few experts to sort it all out.

Why? Learning more than one language offers cognitive benefits (enhanced creativity, increased literacy skills, higher test scores), social advantages (greater acceptance of others) and a competitive edge in an increasingly global job market.

Leslie Lancry, founder of Language Stars, a Chicago-area foreign language institute, calls it "flexibility of the brain."

"In Spanish, we say, 'Water pleases



Tribune file photo by Chuck Berman

In general, the earlier a child learns something the better, whether it's chess or a different language. But it's never too late to start.

me," she says. "In English, we say, 'I like water.' A 3-year-old is able to distinguish the two."

In "The Bilingual Edge" (HarperCollins, \$15.95), authors Alison Mackey and Kendall King note that bilinguals frequently outperform monolinguals on creativity tests.

Asked "How many ways could you use an empty water bottle?" bilinguals come up with more answers and more creative answers, such as "filling it with sand and making a paperweight."

When? Younger is better in some ways.

"Most of the reputable research indicates that for children to attain native-like pronunciation in another language, children should acquire that language before the age of 12," said Bob Oprandy, a professor at University of the Pacific in Stockton, Calif., who specializes in training foreign-language teachers. "Up until that time the brain has more plasticity in the production of speech sounds."

Lancry compares it to early exposure to a sport.

"A 3-year-old who learns to ski is forever a more natural skier," she noted. However, it's never too late to introduce another language.

"Parents shouldn't feel they've missed the boat if their children are older," King said. "Older children can often

learn faster and make more rapid progress than very young children."

"Older children and adults," Oprandy said, "can make better use of written texts, dictionaries and grammar books to sort out the workings of another language."

How? You don't have to wait for your kid's school to offer a foreign language. Language Stars ([languagestars.com](http://languagestars.com)) teaches Spanish, French, German, Italian and Mandarin Chinese at eight locations in the city and suburbs. The Foreign Language Network in Lincoln Park ([foreignlanguage-network.com](http://foreignlanguage-network.com)) offers classes in multiple languages, including sign language.

Find other class options near you at [gocitykids.com](http://gocitykids.com), under "classes and lessons." "The Bilingual Edge" is also a great primer on all things language (Bilingual nanny versus Baby Einstein language DVDs? German or Japanese? Eight months old or 12 years old?)

And if you're still not convinced ...

"Besides the fact that our kids will have more job opportunities if they are fluent in other languages, they also will be more empathetic toward and understanding of people from other cultures," Oprandy said.

"I think here of the final three words in the Moody Blues' song 'Procession': 'Communication, compassion, solution.'"