

PRESCHOOL

# Trilingual toddlers

Learning languages easier between birth and adolescence

BY ANNA CARLSON

It's no secret that the world is a smaller place than it was even 10 years ago, and with this change comes new expectations in language skills.

Those fluent in multiple languages have access to better jobs and opportunities, and research shows they have increased cognitive abilities, as well.

When it comes to kids and bilingualism, it's never too early to begin learning a second language, even if your child is a newborn, says Mary Lane, Kendall College School of Education assistant professor.

"We're naturally wired to learn multiple languages, and across the world bilingualism is much more common than monolingualism," Lane says.

The benefits of learning a second language at an early age include developing better abstract thinking, which can help in other areas of learning, and helping children become more sensitive to cultural diversity, since it is nearly impossible to learn a language without understanding the culture.

And getting started sooner has other advantages. Lane says there is a critical period, around age



COURTESY OF LANGUAGE STARS

Min-I Wang teaches language through play at Language Stars' Lincoln Park Center.

10-12, where the ability to learn becomes significantly harder. This occurs because the brain's cognitive flexibility decreases with age. Young children can hear slight differences in sounds that adults cannot. Learning a language after this critical period isn't impossible, but along with increased difficulty, second language learners will not sound like native speakers.

Language Stars, a foreign language learning program with seven Chicago area centers, was created to give young children age 1-10 the opportunity to learn multiple languages.

"The younger they are, the easier it is to pick up the language without an accent, use it spontaneously and use it naturally," says Language Stars

President and Founder Leslie Lantry.

Age isn't the only important factor in learning a second language. How you learn makes a big difference as well. According to Lane, the best way to learn is through play and exploration, which allows second language learning to be reminiscent of first language learning.

"When we were infants, our mothers and fathers didn't conjugate verbs (with us)," Lane says.

Language Stars has built a curriculum based on this idea. Teachers speak in Spanish, French, German, Italian or Mandarin, as they lead students through songs, art and cooking projects, games, magic shows and other activities to bring out a child's natural ability to learn a foreign language.

Lancry says children learn better through play. "We can use foreign language 100 percent during play, maximizing the learning without our young students even realizing that they are making leaps and bounds of progress," she says.

Human interaction plays a vital role in language learning.

"One thing I would highly warn, in big bold letters, is that it has been shown that you have to learn language from another person or other people," Lane says. "It is impossible to learn language, especially with children, from DVDs, videos or audio tapes. There has been a lot of inaccurate claims, especially with Baby Einstein, that, 'Oh, children will do great if you expose them to this language early,' but it isn't attached to a human."

When looking for a language

"It is impossible to learn language, especially with children, from DVDs, videos or audio tapes."

## MARY LANE

Asst. professor, Kendall College

program or class for your child, make sure the curriculum is play-based.

"The best thing would be to visit the language center or program your child will participate in and observe," Lane says. "Are they engaged in play and exploration? If they are, great. Are they involved in singing and dancing? Great. If they are sitting and conjugating verbs and it looks like your high school foreign language class, that's not going to work."

Parents can also take advantage of Chicago's many ethnic neighborhoods, including Pilsen, Little Italy and Chinatown, to encourage their child's interest in a new culture or continue to develop an interest in a culture they are studying. Lane warns parents not to make their child practice their second language on command, something she says many monolingual parents do.

"Like anything, if you force it on a child and you make it something they have to do, they aren't going to learn to the best of their ability," Lane says. "The ultimate best way (to learn) is making it fun."



Anna Carlson is an intern at Chicago Parent.