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### Personal Business

## BRINGING UP BABY--BILINGUALLY

Marcella Frank believes it's vital for her two boys to learn a foreign language. So along with the soccer games and piano lessons, twice a week the Princeton Junction (N.J.) physician and sons David, 7, and Jonathan, 9, take private Spanish lessons at a Berlitz center. At home, they practice with Spanish video- and audiotapes and computer games. She only frets that the boys started too late.

Laura Colin would probably agree. The New Yorker purposely hired an Argentinian nanny for her 1-year-old son, Alexander. The nanny speaks and reads to the child in Spanish only, while Colin and her husband use English.

More and more parents are hoping to raise bilingual children, and many are getting their kids going before they even enter kindergarten. "It's the greatest gift parents can give their children," says Helena Curtain, a professor at the University of Wisconsin at Milwaukee and co-author of *Languages and Children: Making the Match* (\$26; Scott Foresman-Addison Wesley).

Indeed, the potential benefits of speaking more than one language are enormous. It can not only broaden a child's understanding and acceptance of other cultures but also improve comprehension skills in English. Research suggests that learning a second language at an early age can enrich mental development. "Children gain some abstract abilities," says Jean Berko Gleason, a psychology professor at Boston University. For instance, if kids understand that a dog may be called a dog or "chien," Gleason says, they understand that there is a separation between a thing and the name of the thing. Moreover, anyone who grows up to be fluent may have an advantage in trying to land certain jobs.

"It's good to start early because a child has the time, is not inhibited, and does not have the anxiety adults have when learning a foreign language," says Madeline Ehrlich, founder of Advocates For Language Learning in Culver City, Calif., a nonprofit association of parents, teachers, and others eager to promote language study for children. Another rationale: The sooner kids get going, the longer they'll have to build their skills.

Yet while starting early may help, the common impression that young children will pick up a language more easily than their parents is wrong, says Catherine Snow, a developmental psycholinguist and professor at Harvard University's Graduate School of Education. Where small children do have an advantage over their elders, Snow says, is in emulating accents. "In an hour's class, a 5-year-old might learn one word and no grammar," says Snow. "An adult will learn 30 words and some simple sentences.

But at the end of the hour the one word the child learns may well sound more authentic."

CONFUSING? So how can parents help their kids become bilingual? For starters, if the parents are immigrants, they should not be reluctant (as some are) to speak in their native language around the house. The kids will pick up English by watching TV or playing with friends. "Sometimes parents think that speaking both languages will confuse a child," says Nancy Rhodes, co-director of the foreign language division at the Center for Applied Linguistics in Washington. "It will not." If, on the other hand, neither parent is proficient in a second language, they should consider hiring a bilingual housekeeper or nanny.

Parents should also investigate the language programs offered by schools. Ten years ago, just 22% of the public and private elementary schools surveyed by the Center for Applied Linguistics were teaching a foreign language. That figure has climbed to 31%. The elementary schools providing some kind of language instruction are fairly evenly distributed in urban and suburban areas. But often the instruction is limited to 25 minutes, twice a week.

Some 190 public and private schools around the country offer an immersion program. Starting in kindergarten, these schools teach all or part of their curriculum in a second language, meaning kids may learn math, science, and social studies in French, Spanish, or Japanese. Parents do not typically pay extra, though the kids may have to travel a longer distance to reach such a school.

In a total immersion program, children may spend all of their time learning the 3Rs in another language. In a two-way immersion program, the student population is made up of both English speakers and native speakers of the foreign language. Roughly half the time is spent on each language, which helps both groups become fluent in the language that is foreign to them. You can check out the Center for Applied Linguistics Web site ([www.cal.org](http://www.cal.org)) for lists of immersion and two-way programs around the country .

JUNIOR'S PROGRAM. Berlitz International Inc. (800 457-7958) has introduced a program dubbed Berlitz Jr. into more than 200 elementary schools or school districts. Students take a class where they just speak the foreign language, and they learn to read and write it later. If such a program is not available--or if kids need extra help--Berlitz offers group lessons costing \$250 for 10 sessions at its 65 centers around the country. Ten weeks of private instruction cost \$1,300 to \$1,500, including a workbook and review tapes.

No matter when and where your children pick up a language, they need to stick with it outside the classroom and as they get older. Learning a language is "not like riding a bicycle," says Snow. "It's more like a muscle you've got to keep using." Parents can lend a hand in a number of ways (table). Although it's important to praise and encourage children who show an aptitude for the language, parents shouldn't force it down their throats.

Of course, children are more likely to be interested if the learning is fun. If there's a cable-TV station in your area that broadcasts in a foreign language, have the kids tune in to the cartoons or kiddie shows. And it sometimes helps to make a game of labeling items around the house with foreign words.

Some fine foreign language audio- and videotapes, as well as picture books and dictionaries, are intended for young children. For example, *The Cat in the Hat* by Dr. Seuss is available in Spanish. Berlitz recently came out with a \$16.95 combination picture book and cassette called *The Missing Cat* in English, French, Spanish, German, and Italian. It's the first in the *Adventures with Nicholas* series, for children up to age 9.

The BBC Language Course for Children (\$169 plus shipping and handling) is built around an alien character called Muzzy, that looks like a cross between a bear and a gorilla. Available in German, Italian,

Spanish, and French, the Muzzy courses, for infants on up to age 12, feature videos, audiocassettes, a book, a parents guide, and a CD-ROM. Parents can order off the Web ([www.early-advantage.com](http://www.early-advantage.com)) or by phone (888 327-5923).

FAMILY-FRIENDLY. Your computer may also come in handy. Parents should help kids locate family-friendly Web sites in foreign languages. Syracuse Language Systems and The Learning Co. are among the companies that produce helpful language tutorial software. Syracuse's TriplePlay Plus! CD-ROM series incorporates multimedia games and speech recognition (with microphone) to help students practice their accent. The \$60 programs, which are available in seven languages, are geared to 8-year-olds and up. Syracuse's \$25 All-In-One Language Fun! program is aimed at ages 3 to 12. Kids can play games such as bingo and Simon says in any of the five languages contained on the disk. Broderbund Software's Just Grandma And Me, an interactive animated storybook for children 3 to 7, lets kids switch among English, French, German, or Spanish on any screen.

Of course, the best way to practice a language is to schmooze with the natives. So if possible, invite over bilingual guests, help your child find overseas pen pals, or spend time as a clan in a foreign country. Your kid can always act as the interpreter.

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