

## Learning A Second Language

By Janet Gonzalez-Mena

"What is a good age to start teaching a second language?

Is it better to introduce a second language when children are first starting to talk or after they have successfully learned their native tongue?" The parent who asked this question is interested in bilingualism, but at the same time she is worried about language delays.

Will two languages create problems? Research literature shows next to nothing to support the myth that learning two languages at once delays language development to any significant degree. Certainly many children all over the world have learned two or more languages from birth without causing delays in their language development. And even language delayed children don't seem to be hurt by learning a second language. Research in Canada showed that kindergarten children who were delayed in English, their first language, were not harmed when placed in a French immersion program until third grade as long as they had specialized help in their own language at the same time.

Should you teach your child a second language? The answer is: "It depends." It depends on the circumstances, available resources, and how strong your motivation is. There may be compelling reasons, such as a parent or grandparent who doesn't speak English, an "au pair" from another country, an impending move overseas. Or perhaps the parents believe strongly in bilingualism as an educational goal. If there is a compelling reason, by all means bring in a second language. However, do it in a nonstressful, relaxed, and natural way. Don't push your child unduly in order for him or her to learn more than one language. The stress itself can cause language delays.

Individual families have different ideas about starting a second language. Contrast these two stories. One family has an "au pair" from South America. The mother and toddler children are learning Spanish from her and the whole family is happy about it. Another

family has a German exchange student living with them.

The mother, a native English speaker who also speaks German says she is not pushing for her children to learn German. She says that her husband, a native Spanish speaker, who also speaks English, will feel left out if she, the children, and the exchange student are all speaking German. This multilingual family has established English as the family language. "There's plenty of time for the girls to learn German if they want to," says the mother.

The first parent feels that the earlier you introduce a second language, the better. The other feels emotional factors and family unity are more important than early second language learning. She sees the children's motivation as important.

In some ways early is better, but how early is still a question that can only be answered by individual families according to their own beliefs and circumstances. It is true that if you wait until high school, language patterns are so set that it may be more difficult to take on new ones. And if you're concerned about a native-like accent, you should start before the age of twenty. After that age--there will always be a trace of an accent. But plenty of bilingual people have started at high school age to acquire their second language and have ended up not only fluent, but with native-like abilities.

Elementary school age is a fine time to start, so is preschool age as long as the second language is taught orally in a natural context without creating undue stress.

If you are truly worried and especially if you don't have an easy, natural means of teaching the second language, wait until your child has established his or her first language.

If you speak a second language fluently or have a way to arrange ongoing interactions with someone else who is

fluent, infancy and toddlerhood isn't too early to begin. In any case, only teach spoken language and teach it through conversations, not drills. Be sure to avoid all pressure, academics, direct instruction, or a heavy reward system, which goes against the natural learning style of the very young.

"Language is caught, not taught" should be the motto of every parent interested in second language learning for his or her child.

Here are three tips about how to do that if you decide that second language learning is for your family.

1. Be sure that you or the person teaching the second language teaches language in context by adding natural conversation to situations. Treat the second language the way you do the first, by imbedding it in experience. Don't give "language lessons."
2. Be sure the person teaching the second language speaks it well. The children will learn what they hear. If it is poorly accented, disjointed, "broken," that's what they will learn.
3. Remove stress whenever possible during second language sessions. Don't pressure children. Make sure it is pleasant, interesting, fun and natural.