

Can a second language be taught too soon?

"Concombre!" Adelaide stated as she raised the half-eaten cucumber slice toward me. Adelaide maintained a tight-fisted grip on her edible prize as she expressed enthusiasm for her snack using this single French word. Adelaide is a curious two-year-old in a newly opened bilingual nursery school run by Lennox and Addington Resources for Children at The Prince Charles School in Napanee. Bilingual educator Kelsey McNeil explains that this half-day program is a fun way for preschoolers to learn French words that relate to their everyday world.

When children join the program about 70 per cent of the vocabulary is spoken in English with some directions and words offered in French. If children show confusion, the French words are repeated and followed with English translations. The amount of French spoken at nursery school then increases responsively to the children's readiness over time. This approach builds children's confidence and language skills in French before attending full-day French immersion programs.

Adelaide begins exploring two-dimensional designs on paper using three-dimensional rocks, buttons, and amber beads. Kelsey is at her side labelling the loose parts and shapes in French. "Un bouton," offers Kelsey as Adelaide picks up a large button. "Des roches....en circle...un carré," she continues to describe Adelaide's play as Adelaide dips her hand into the wooden bowl of small rocks, and moves rocks and beads on her paper to create circular and square shapes.

Around the globe there are as many bilingual children as there are monolingual children. Research shows there are tremendous benefits to learning more than one language. For example, the children of parents who teach them basic English words for kids and grow their understanding of English from a younger age are shown to have more of an advantage when it comes to jobs and opportunities when they're older. Many children from around the world that start to learn English from a young age often go on to do [business English training](#), continuing in this path into roles that are vital within many industries that require communication from a business perspective in different languages. In Canada, the economic advantages for those who speak French and English are easily measured in terms of employability and median income. (<http://en.copian.ca/library/research/ccl/bilingualism/bilingualism.pdf>) Other research indicates that learning to speak more than one language impacts brain function. One way in which bilingual children benefit is through an increased ability to focus their attention and ignore distractions.

(<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/p.m.c/articles/P.m.C4346342/>)

Yet, many parents wonder if teaching a second language to children who are still acquiring their first is a good idea. They observe children mixing two languages and worry that this will confuse their child. Language mixing, however, is common and predictable. It shows the presence and management of two language systems governed by language rules the child is internalizing. Rather than a sign of language confusion, many researchers consider it to be a sign of bilingual proficiency.

Some also worry that bilingualism could cause language delays. Here again research negates this concern. Infants and toddlers who learn two languages from birth go through the same basic language milestones as monolingual learners. At first, the number of words a bilingual child knows in one language is typically less than a monolingual child. But when vocabulary in both languages is considered, the number of words a bilingual child knows is at least the same quantity as a monolingual child. When bilingual children begin to speak in short sentences, their grammar develops in the same time frames and patterns as monolingual children. Children in either bilingual or monolingual programs may present with language delays but the reasons for the delay cannot be attributed to being in a bilingual program.

I had to ask, "What excites you about opening a bilingual nursery school?" Allison Timms, supervisor of this new program was quick to respond. "I find it exciting to learn with the children, to see their accomplishments."

And then I heard the teacher's and children's proud voices. 'Tête, épaules, genoux, orteils'. Not all the words were sung with clarity or confidence but they were sung with joy as the children reached for their head and shoulders, knees and toes.

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