

*Early Literacy Article April 2009*

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At three years of age Keiko and her family moved to Canada. When it was time for Keiko to register for Kindergarten, Keiko's Japanese mother worried she would be unable to help her daughter learn to read English. Keiko's Canadian dad thought about the value of children learning both official languages and wondered about registering Keiko in French Immersion.

Though socially, conditions are different for children who are learning English as the second language in Canada than they are for English speaking children learning a second language such as French, Mohawk, Algonquin or Métis, the decision to place a child in immersion is rarely straight forward.

*Does learning more than one language at the same time “confuse” children’s language development?*

- It is normal, in the early stages of learning a second language, for young children to mix up sounds, words, phrases and grammar. With repeated and rich language experiences in both languages, however, children develop separate language structures quickly.
- The brain is most receptive to learning language at an early age. In fact babies are called “world citizens” because they are born with the ability to hear the sounds of all languages in the world. Without early exposure to other languages, however, this ability fades with age.
- Children with speech or language delays in their preschool years may experience difficulty in an immersion program. Individual consideration is especially important for children with hearing, articulation or language processing challenges.

*Does early French Immersion have a detrimental effect on development of English literacy skills?*

- There is usually a temporary lag in English literacy skills. This disappears shortly after English is introduced into the curriculum (usually between Grades 2- 4). Immersion children catch up to and often surpass their peers in the English-only classes by Grade 5 or 6.

*Can parents support their child’s language and literacy learning at school when their child is taught in a language one or both parents do not know well?*

- Alka Burman, Early Literacy Specialist from Peel Region, emphasizes that her experiences with new immigrants to Canada matches the research. More than anything else, children need rich language and literacy experiences in their mother tongue. Children make the necessary connections between differing languages more easily if they hear a broad vocabulary, correct grammar, and can talk about meanings, metaphors and nuances. Parents, who tell stories, share books, talk about ideas and answer questions in the language they know best, enrich their child’s learning more profoundly than if they explain and respond using language in which they are less competent. Home language has a powerful impact on children’s knowledge base, their ability to communicate within the family, and their motivation to ask questions and seek out new information.

If and how children learn a second language will be unique to each child. But it's good to know that when we share language, books and stories from the culture we know well, it can help our children become literate in other languages too.