



Learning a new language at different ages: What parents can do to help learners

How old are your children now? Has the way they use English changed since they were younger? How about their first language – how has that developed? And has their attitude to learning changed and evolved?

Every young language learner develops in their own way. But it is interesting to notice how learners at different ages tend to face different obstacles, and have different strengths. In this article, we will explore the opportunities and challenges of learners at different ages, so that you can help your child stay motivated and achieve their learning goals.

Here are things that different parents might say about their children. For each of these, how old do you think the child or children might be?

1. *My son is only just learning to read and write in his first language.*
2. *Even in her first language, my daughter doesn't really use a lot of long sentences or complex grammar.*
3. *My daughter understands ideas much better if they're about real people, places or events that she's actually seen or been part of. She doesn't understand abstract ideas so well.*
4. *I'm always amazed by how keen my son is to try new things in front of other people. He doesn't get embarrassed and self-conscious like his big brother.*
5. *My son's very keen to learn, and he always does his best to do everything his teacher asks. Not like his big sister! She's often influenced by her friends more than her teachers or parents.*
6. *My son's always asking 'Why do we have to do this?' and 'How will this help me?'*
7. *My daughter's very interested in the 'how and why' of things – how things work, why things are as they are – and she often takes this approach to learning a language.*

Of course, you may have very different experiences from those above. It is important to recognise that children and teenagers are individuals, with different abilities, interests, social backgrounds and learning styles. However, thinking about child development tendencies can help parents choose language learning activities that are more likely to match their children's needs.

Here, then, is some general advice:



- The first two children above are probably younger children. When helping children learn a new language, it is important to do things that take into account their stage of development in their own language. A simple example would be using pictures rather than written words to introduce new vocabulary if a child is at the early stages of learning to read. Of course, younger children have advantages too. In natural situations where they are surrounded by a new language, they are often quicker to learn than their parents. They probably can't explain what verbs are, but they can quickly learn to use them naturally and accurately.
- The third child is probably a similar age. With younger children, try to focus on real things that they will know about, rather than abstract ideas. For example, think carefully before using things like graphs and charts. This does not mean you should never use these things, but you'll need to use them in a way that enables understanding.
- Embarrassment and self-consciousness can be a complex issue for children and teenagers of all ages, but younger children are often less embarrassed than teenagers or adults about trying new things, like saying new words, in front of other people. With any age group, though, most children will feel more comfortable if they are not asked to 'perform' by speaking a foreign language.
- In the fifth example, the son is probably a younger child, and the big sister is likely to be a teenager. Teenage learners are often more independent from adults and teachers, and social factors such as the need to impress their friends may distract them or affect their motivation. This is the challenge with this age group: ensuring that learners have a clear aim or purpose for learning the language. Creating a purpose for learning might include being able to chat to people from other countries online, or to spend time abroad.
- The sixth child, questioning the value of the learning tasks he has been asked to do, is also likely to be a teenager. Learners in this age group often benefit from tasks that appeal to their interests, reflect their life experiences, and help them achieve a goal that they really believe is important. Learning the lyrics of their favourite song rather than learning a dialogue from a course book is one obvious example, or reading articles in a teen magazine rather than one from an adult newspaper.
- The seventh child may well also be a teenager – learners like this are more likely to be able to analyse language and describe it as well as using it to communicate.

When helping their children to learn a language, parents need to ask themselves, at their children's stage of development, will they be able to



understand how to succeed in the task? And will they be able to relate to the new language they are learning?

Learning a new language can be one of the most enjoyable and rewarding activities for learners of any age. By thinking about your child's needs, strengths and challenges, including those related to their age, you can help them to find it so.

Further reading about children's language learning:

Cameron, L (2001) *Teaching Languages to Young Learners*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Crystal, D (2010) *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of Language* (3rd edition), Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Lakshmanan, U (2009) Child second language acquisition, in Ritchie, W and Bhatia, T K (Eds.) *The New Handbook of Second Language Acquisition*, Sheffield, UK: Emerald, 377–399.

Pinter, A (2011) *Children Learning Second Languages*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Issue 6 of the Cambridge English Parents' Newsletter contains practical ideas for parents, including suggestions particularly aimed at parents of younger or older children.

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