



French Immersion for the Student with Down Syndrome

By Krista Ewert, *Blogger*

Canadian Parents for French's 2012 research report, "The State of French Second-Language Education in Canada", focused on access to French Second Language programs for academically challenged students. With the help of stakeholders, educators, and policy makers from across the country, the research report offered recommendations on how to provide more inclusionary and best practices for children with learning disabilities.

Krista Ewert, a blogger and self-described "defender of the oppressed, photographer, and domestic diva," is a mother of two children, Jakob and Ella, one of who happens to have Down Syndrome. In a recent blog post, Ms. Ewert explains why she enrolled her daughter in French Immersion.

This article was originally published on Krista Ewert's blog "one beautiful life" and, with her permission, appears here in its entirety, along with photographs taken by the author.

It's official.

We have registered Ella for French Immersion and she has been accepted into Lord Tennyson Elementary, where Jakob is currently enrolled in grade 1. Lord Tennyson is a one track school, which means everyone is in French Immersion. I know what you're thinking... you must be mad! Well, no, I don't think I am. I recognize that it is an unconventional decision and from what I can tell, completely uncharted territory but I think that the potential in such an endeavour makes it worth a try.

The Why

There are many reasons why we think French Immersion is the best decision for Ella:

1 It keeps Ella with her brother in the same school.

Because Lord Tennyson is our early French Immersion catchment school and because it is a one track school, we would either have to pull Jakob out of French or put Ella into French to keep them together. I think it is important that they are together first and foremost because Jakob is Ella's guardian - it's not a label we have put on him or forced him into but he naturally is, as her older brother. Secondly, it is really quite inconvenient having children at two different schools. We are experiencing that right now. Ella is picked up early from



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her school to get to Jakob's school for 3pm. In addition, two schools would mean potential conflicts with Christmas Concerts, Winter Fairs, etc.

2 We believe that there are many advantages to having a second language.

Reasons range from the fact that Canada is officially a bilingual country, to our desire to travel and possibly live abroad when the kids are a bit older, to the fact that the learning of a second language serves to strengthen other areas of learning such as creativity and music.

3 Why not?

When people ask me why we are putting Ella into French Immersion, I say that my cynical answer is, "If they expect her to fail in English, why not let her fail in French." I know what you're thinking...real mature. But the truth is that there is not enough evidence to prove that French Immersion is detrimental to students with special needs. The fact of the matter is that there aren't enough cases to do an accurate assessment. Ella would be the first child with Down Syndrome to attend Lord Tennyson and, as far as I know, one of the first to be enrolled in French Immersion in Canada. So in this way, I suppose you could say that Ella is a guinea pig (or as my husband corrects

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me: a pioneer), which I am okay with, because if her experience can serve to benefit children with special needs in the future, I am all for that.

4 External Benefits.

There are also many benefits that have an external affect. There is much skepticism surrounding French Immersion. I have been told that it is the “poor man’s private school”. Yes, to my face. In reality, this is somewhat true. Jakob attended private school in England and it was the best experience we have ever had. If I could afford private school here in Canada, I would have put Jakob in one. That being said, we chose French Immersion for Jakob because he had already had a year of school when we came to Canada and going into kindergarten he needed a challenge (the English system teaches literacy much earlier and therefore he was exceptionally ahead in every subject area). But the fact of the matter is that some people believe that there is a higher success rate for children in French Immersion

because they would do well anywhere. The argument presented in the *Globe and Mail** is that it is a way of “streaming”. In reality, there are very few children with special needs in Jakob’s school. By enrolling Ella, she will give these children the benefit of diversity and the lesson of acceptance. Not only that, but it is my hope to document our progress, whether that be one year or twelve years, and hopefully shed some light on whether French Immersion is appropriate for some children with Down Syndrome. Obviously, Ella is just one individual and her experience will be different from others, however, she may face some of the same challenges as her peers with Down Syndrome.

To be honest, I don’t feel like I owe anyone an explanation as to why we have made this decision. This is the beauty of Canada and the leaps and bounds that have been made in the area of inclusion - they can’t legally refuse us. But while I know it is the best choice that we can make with the cards

that we have before us at the present, there is obviously a sense of reservation and insecurity.

There always is with anything “new”. I want to share this journey with you partly because there may be someone out there who can benefit from this information or the progression of our own reasoning on the topic... as parents and partly because I believe that in writing out and articulating these thoughts, I will be better able to document our experience and identify weaknesses in my arguments and evidence for or against French Immersion for children with Down Syndrome. So welcome here. Welcome to this journey. ■

* *Why is French immersion so popular?* Author: Margaret Wente
www.theglobeandmail.com/globe-debate/why-is-french-immersion-so-popular/article8206738



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