

# HOW DO I KNOW IF FRENCH IMMERSION IS RIGHT FOR MY CHILD?

BY ANTONIA CETIN, M.ED.



LEARNING A LANGUAGE IS SERIOUS BUSINESS. LEARNING  
A LANGUAGE DEVELOPS CRITICAL THINKING. LEARNING A  
LANGUAGE CAN HELP YOU GET A FOOT IN THE DOOR. LEARNING  
A LANGUAGE CAN INCREASE OPPORTUNITIES AVAILABLE TO YOU.  
**BUT IS IT FOR EVERYONE AND IS IT FOR YOUR CHILD?**

CONTINUED...



**Antonia Cetin** has been a teacher for 27 years. As a French Second Language instructional coach, she works with teachers on pedagogical practices and strategies. Antonia runs training sessions and leads learning groups locally, national and internationally.

In other countries all around the world, learning a second language or even a third or fourth is no big deal. It's part of the culture, it's part of going to school and people who speak several languages are the norm. So, does their geographical location of birth make these people smarter than us? Do they have more linguistic ability than Canadians? Do people who move to Canada and then learn English and French have some extra gene that allows them to learn a language that we don't? Hardly. If we learned one language, does that not mean that we are capable of learning languages? What these people have is exposure to the language, motivation to practice, and a growing confidence in their abilities.

Likewise, for the children who go into French immersion, they need to have exposure to French, motivation to practice their French, and they need to feel they are making progress.

### ? What if my child doesn't know what to do?

In an immersion program where the teacher speaks only in French, students get necessary exposure to the language. Don't worry that your child won't know what's going on or what to do all of the time. It's expected that second language learners will need to figure things out. The teacher will use gestures, speak with lots of expression, and slow the speed of

speech for students who need it. Also, kids will look around to see what's going on and will be able to figure things out by watching their peers and following what those peers are doing. For most kids, their French teacher is the only person they hear speaking in French, so it's important for the teacher to speak in French consistently in order for students to develop vocabulary and language structures.

### ? What if it's too hard for my child?

As long as we believe in their abilities and encourage them to hang in when they face the challenge, children will be able to learn French. Will they get frustrated? Sometimes. (Don't you get frustrated when you're telling a story and you can't think of the right word?) Will they be tired? You bet. Learning a language takes a lot of concentration. Won't they struggle and make mistakes? Without struggle and mistakes learning doesn't happen. Allowing your child to struggle in a controlled environment helps them learn and develop coping strategies and resilience.

### ? But I don't speak any French. How will I help my child?

You don't have to speak French to encourage your child to speak in French. You don't have to play chess in order to

encourage them to play chess; or, to be an artist to encourage them to draw. You do need to show them you value learning languages and you need to motivate them. Then, you can celebrate in their accomplishments, thereby giving them more confidence to take risks.

If you feel like you want to be more involved in their language learning, you can watch an age-appropriate video in French with them. When they have learned to read, you can have them read you a story in French. You may not understand it all, but you can ask them to explain it which will develop their listening and reading comprehension skills. You can ask them how to say certain things in French. If you know they are learning about money, you can ask them at the store how they would read the prices in French. And, you can marvel with them about how they are capable of saying things that you can't - how cool is that?!

### ? What if we already speak another language at home? Won't that confuse my child?

The brain is a mysterious and marvellous thing which is able to compartmentalise and regionalize languages. Once you start learning an additional language, you can tell which words go with which language and how those words work in each language. In some families, children talk to one parent in one language and to the

other parent in another language, and the brain accepts that's how it works. Furthermore, when you learn a second language, you learn coping strategies that will help you learn other languages: using visual clues, watching for people's reactions, paying attention to gestures, picking out familiar sounds and noticing inflection. This means that the more languages you learn, the easier it is to learn other languages.

### ? What if my child can't read in English yet?

Learning to read requires the same skills in any language: picking up clues from pictures and from context, phonological awareness, decoding, and making predictions. For students who are experiencing difficulty reading in either language, they may need a little more time to practice (they didn't all learn to talk at the same time either) or they may need extra support. As a parent, you may have to practice with them at home and you may have to be their advocate at school to make sure they get the support they need. Support in either language, however, will help them to learn to read in both languages.

### ? Where does the motivation to speak in French come from?

If the expectation in the classroom is that only French is spoken, the motivation is to speak with others. Initially, there may be

a silent period where students are trying to figure out how to say things and are just listening. Eventually, because we are all social and learn through social interaction, a need will arise for the student to use French. Maybe the student will need a pencil, some help or an opinion. The motivation will come to the student naturally in order to have that need met.

### ? How will their confidence grow?

When learning to play hockey, to play the piano, or to speak French, the more you practice, the more you improve, the more confidence you gain, the more you take risks and the more you enjoy it. Just as practice makes perfect for any skill, so does realizing that practice is paying off. When students realize they are making progress, they will feel encouraged and will be more likely to take risks. We need to help them see the progress they are making and celebrate their risk-taking.

Because of the exposure to French that a child has in French immersion, the motivation to participate in classroom activities, and the practice and awareness of their progress, French immersion provides an excellent environment for learning French and for developing resiliency, critical thinking and literacy skills that will help children succeed in their French immersion program, in school, and in life. ■

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