

Top Ten Answers for Parents about Immersion Education

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Why should I choose immersion education for my child?

Parents want to make the best educational choices for their children, and many would like them to have the advantages of bilingualism. The ability to understand and speak more than one language is not the only benefit of immersion education. Research shows that students gain additional cognitive, academic and employment benefits.

How does immersion differ from other types of language instruction?

In traditional second language instruction, the target language is the subject of instruction. Immersion programs use the target language for instruction and as a means of communication. This authentic communication allows students to learn a second language in a similar manner to the way that they have learned their first.

Do children need above average academic ability to succeed in immersion?

Students with lower academic ability do as well in immersion as they might in English programs and have the additional benefit of bilingualism. Researchers found that "below-average students in immersion scored at the same level as below-average students in the English program on English language and academic achievement tests." In addition, "below-average students in immersion scored significantly higher on second-language tests than the below-average students in the English program" (Genesee, in press).

How bilingual will my child be?

Immersion programs have generally produced better second-language proficiency results than traditional foreign language teaching strategies. The intensive exposure to the target language is important because it allows students quickly to reach the level of second-language proficiency required to study other subjects in the new language. Immersion students approach native-like levels in second-language listening comprehension and reading by the end of elementary school, although they are distinguishable from native speakers in speaking and writing. High school immersion graduates should be able to work in or pursue post-secondary studies in their second language. In fact, in Canada, many high school immersion graduates attained an intermediate or higher level of second-language proficiency on Public Service Commission of Canada tests. (Lazaruk, in press)

Will immersion education affect my child's English-language skills?

Students can add a second language at no cost to their first language competence (additive bilingualism) because languages are interdependent. Skills developed in the second language are available for learning and using in the first language and vice versa. First-language arts are introduced by the middle elementary years, while family and community also reinforce first language skills. (Lazaruk, in press)

Research has shown that "the effect of learning a second language on first-language skills has been positive in all studies done.... [and] the loss of instructional time in English has never been shown to have negative effects on the achievement of the first language." (Bournot-Trites & Tellowitz, 2002) In fact, immersion students match and often surpass English program students' performance by Grade 4 or 5 after first-language arts are introduced in the middle elementary years. (Turnbull, Hart & Lapkin, 2000)

Can my child really learn math and science in their second language?

Reviews of research studies found that immersion students met or exceeded English program students' performance in mathematics and science, and province-wide assessments in three Canadian provinces* found that at grades 6, 8, and 10, respectively, immersion students did as well as or achieved at a significantly higher level than those in the regular program. (Bournot-Trites & Tellowitz, 2002; British Columbia Ministry of Education, 2000; Dube & MacFarlane, 1999; New Brunswick Department of Education, 2000; Turnbull, Hart & Lapkin, 2000.)

*Although other provinces and territories conduct province-wide assessments, they do not separate the results of immersion and English program students.

Will immersion graduates have trouble in university or college because they didn't take high school subjects in English?

A survey of Canadian university students (Canadian Parents for French, 2005) found that the majority of immersion graduates surveyed reported no difficulty in adjusting to university courses offered in English. In fact, immersion graduates have more options than other students because in Canada they may choose to take some or all post-secondary courses in their second language. The majority of survey respondents reported no difficulty in making the transition from high school to university courses in French.

What are the cognitive benefits of being bilingual?

[Editor's note: Research on the cognitive benefits of immersion education specifically is limited. Some researchers argue that immersion students' language proficiency may not be developed as sufficiently as that of fully bilingual individuals who researchers feel more consistently exhibit the behaviors discussed below.]

- Mental Flexibility

Bilinguals are better able to analyze their knowledge of language. They learn that there are at least two ways of saying the same thing and understand the relationship between words and their meaning. They are able to focus more on meaning and take into account only relevant features when there is distractive information. (Heightened metalinguistic awareness.) Bilinguals demonstrate more mental flexibility and perform better on tasks requiring mental manipulation. They are original in verbal expression, demonstrate non-verbal intelligence and can answer open-ended questions more freely than monolinguals (Lazaruk, in press).

- Increased sensitivity to others; heightened awareness, receptivity and appreciation of language.

Students with two well-developed languages are more sensitive to communication. There is some evidence to suggest that they are better able to understand the needs of others and to respond appropriately. Through exposure to cultural differences they may become more respectful of differences between people and their cultures and may be able to communicate with a large variety of people (Lazaruk, in press).

What are the employment benefits of immersion education?

Bilinguals have access to a wider range of national and international jobs. Thousands of businesses operate in more than one language - airlines, import-export companies and other international businesses require employees with second-language skills and cultural sensitivity.

How can I help my child if I don't know the language?

Immersion teachers know that most parents don't understand the target language. Indeed, immersion programs were designed specifically for children of unilingual parents. You can help make your child's second-language experience positive and lasting by being supportive and enthusiastic. Research shows that students whose parents have positive attitudes towards the target language do better in immersion programs. Remember that most skills learned in the first language are transferred to the second. Read to your children in English, encourage English writing, and introduce English-language word games like crossword puzzles, word searches, Scrabble and Password. Provide opportunities to use the target language outside of the classroom: borrow or buy books and videos, watch second-language TV with your child, and expose your child to second-language events and activities like plays, interest courses, and sport activities.