**Learning a Second Language:**

**How Parents/Families Can Help**

You don't have to understand Spanish or Japanese (or Lakota/Dakota!) to help your child boost their language skills. Here's how parents can support language learning at home.

A parent’s attitude toward language learning is crucial to a child’s success, say language teachers and researchers. And parents don’t always recognize the value of learning a second language in a changing world, says Marty Abbott, director of education for the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages. “Adult Americans are for the most part monolingual. They say, ‘Well, I’ve been successful.'”

Why learn a language? It’s likely to help your child become a better thinker, as well as giving her an advantage in the work world. (more information, see: *http://www.greatschools.org/gk/articles/learn-second-language*/)

Here’s what you can do to support language classes at your child’s school and language learning at home:

* **Help your child make time to practice.** Learning a language is like learning to play an instrument, says Paula Patrick, foreign language coordinator for the Fairfax County, Va., public schools. There needs to be time to practice.
* **Have your student teach you to say something in the language every day.** Explaining is learning. Let your child laugh at your mangled pronunciation – and correct you.
* **Find cultural events connected to the language and culture being studied.** “I’m big on kids developing a personal connection with the language because at some point, they’ll hit a teacher they don’t connect with,” says Michael Bacon, who coordinates the nationally recognized language immersion programs for public schools in Portland, Ore. This can be tough in communities without many immigrants or for families whose children are studying less commonly used languages like Arabic or Mandarin. But it can often be done with some creative thinking. Bacon says Portland students in a Japanese class acted as translators for a child from Japan who was admitted to a local hospital. Or check to see if your city has a sister city program or your local business community has ties abroad that can connect students to native speakers.
* **Ask the teacher for resources your child can use at home.** The Internet offers a wealth of language resources unimaginable even a few years ago. “Challenge that teacher to think outside the box,” says Tom Welch, a former French teacher, Kentucky Teacher of the Year and principal, and currently an education consultant. “If the teacher’s not responsive, say to your child, ‘Let’s get online together and find out what we can discover that can help you.'”
* **Provide videos, books and music in the language.** “You can even use these in beginning language class,” Patrick says. “You can get meaning even if you don’t get every word.” Ask the teacher for suggestions before you buy to make sure the resources are geared toward a young learner rather than an adult business traveler.
* **Be an advocate.** Having a great program in elementary school doesn’t guarantee that classes will be available in middle or high school to increase your child’s skills. Ask about your district’s plans to provide continuous language-learning opportunities for students at all grade levels, and learn how you can help. The American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages offers [tips for parents who want to advocate for language programs](http://www.discoverlanguages.org/i4a/pages/index.cfm?pageid=3656) in their communities.

*http://www.greatschools.org/gk/articles/learning-a-second-language/*