

# Language-learning

A survey of parents of  
young children

July 2021



## Parents' interest in languages is growing

More and more parents are introducing their babies and young children to a second language, reflecting growing interest in the benefits of speaking other languages and bilingualism.

This survey looks both at parents' own language-learning and also at the next generation: what parents want and hope to be able to give their children in this key area of life and personal development.



## Aims of the survey

The survey aims to give a picture of current family language-learning and find answers to questions that interest parents, including:

If you start learning a language very young, will you speak it better?

When do parents think children should start with another language?

What sorts of things do parents do to help their children to grow up with a second language?

## Method

We recruited 177 parents of children aged 0-3 for the survey, including through language- and parenting-related groups on social media. They were aged from under 19 to over 44, though the majority (71%) were in their 30s.

We used survey software to ask 10 questions about their own and their children's language-learning.

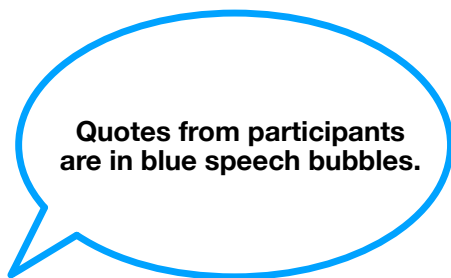
Each parent told us about their experience with one (non-native) language they had learned - including when they had started learning it and how they felt about using it now.

On their children, we asked how they wanted their child's experience to be, the best age for starting and how they were willing to help.

## Survey results - key findings summary:

### Most parents think children should start with a second language from birth

- A huge majority (90%) of parents in the survey think children should start with another language from birth to three years, with many citing young children's capacities for picking up languages naturally and without self-consciousness.



### Early starters speak their second language better and are more satisfied with it

While it's possible to learn a language successfully at any age, our results agree with the prevailing view that the earlier you can start, the better:

- Participants who had started learning from 0-11 years were significantly more satisfied with how they use their language than those who had started from 12 or over.

- More very early starters (0-3 years) rate their current interactions now as "really deep and authentic" compared to the other starting-age bands.

- The very early starters (0-3 years) are the most satisfied with how they speak the language now.



## What we found out - parents' learning

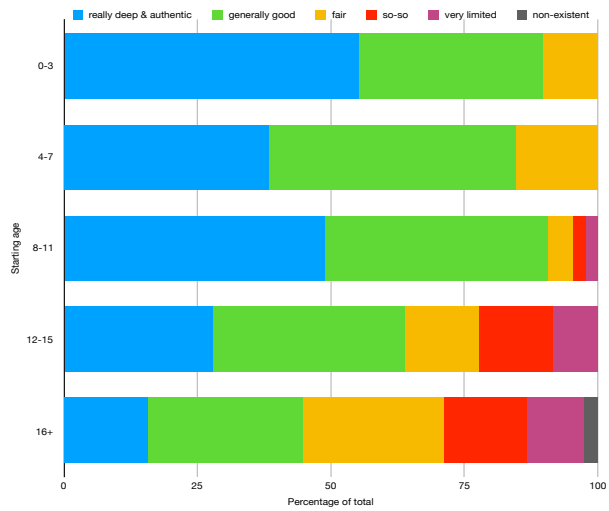
### Key finding:

#### More early starters rate their current interactions “really deep and authentic”

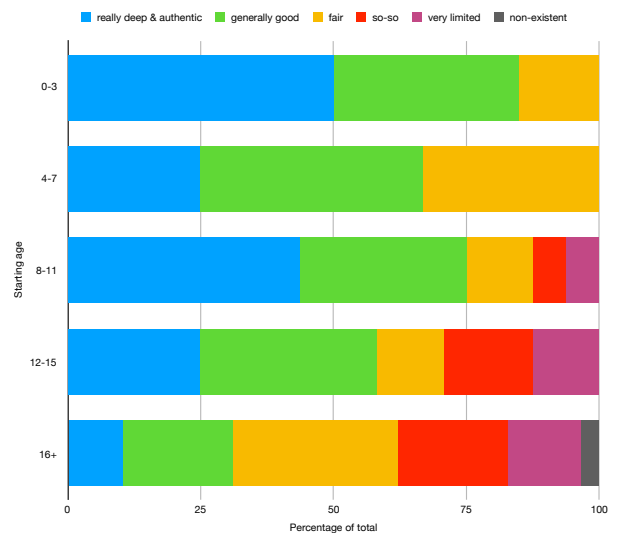
The people who started learning a language between birth and 3 years are most likely to rate their interactions in that language now as “really deep and authentic” - over half of these very early starters (55%) rated their interactions in this way.

This declines to 28% of those who started learning at secondary-school age 12-15 and to 16% for people who started learning a language at age 16+. This group of later starters also has the largest proportion rating their current interactions as “so-so” or below.

Current interaction vs. starting age



Current interaction vs. starting age (excl. English)



We also removed English from the findings, in case its dominant position among the world's languages was skewing the results.

We found, though, that the patterns we observed still hold: the highest proportion of those rating their current interactions as ‘really deep and authentic’ was in the group who had started aged 0-3 (50%), while among those who had started aged 12-15, only half as many rated their interactions this way.

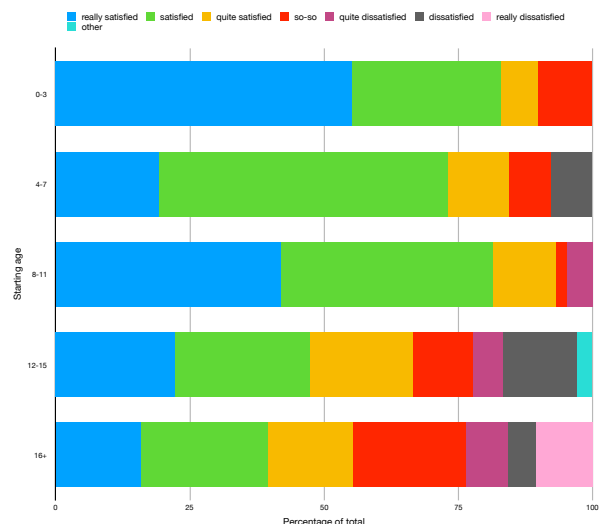
### Key finding:

#### The early starters are the most satisfied with how they speak the language now.

When we asked what people's level of satisfaction is with the way they use the language now, we also saw that it was the earliest starters (0-3 years) who had the highest levels of satisfaction.

55% of those who started from 0-3 years rated themselves as ‘really satisfied’ with how they spoke the language now, significantly more than in the next-highest group (42% of those who had started aged 8-11).

Satisfaction vs. starting age



## How can these key findings be explained?

These results suggest that starting with a language from birth to three means you'll be more likely to speak it to a level you feel is deep and authentic and to be really satisfied with how you use it.

So what might be the mechanisms behind these results for birth to three?

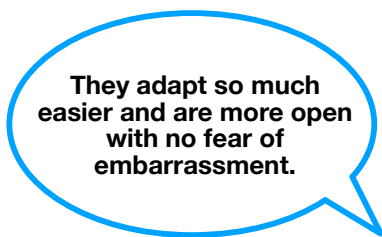
### Sounds

A factor that seems very likely is the ease with which children at this stage (and particularly babies) absorb the sounds of language.

Having a deep grasp of a language's sounds from early experience could give the earliest starters a level of comfort and ease in pronunciation and understanding that older learners can find difficult to achieve.



**0-3: least resistance, "ear" for pronunciation and accents**



**They adapt so much easier and are more open with no fear of embarrassment.**

### A feeling it's part of who you are

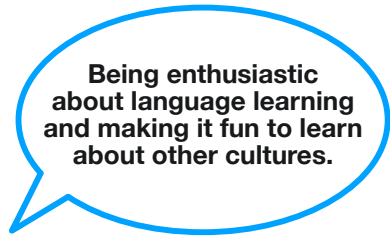
Then there's the psychological ease with which we all take to things we're exposed to as babies and toddlers. When we look back on activities from this time, it's often with a great feeling of comfort and naturalness.

This sense that something is a part of who you are could act as a powerful incentive to carry on using - and learning - the language throughout life, as well as helping avoid the feelings of self-consciousness which limit many teenage and adult learners.

### Encouraging parents

Another thing to consider is whether the earliest starters have particularly motivated parents, who were so encouraging that using the language was fun and meaningful throughout childhood. Parental input and motivation can lead to huge differences in children's achievement, so this should also be considered.

As a parent or carer, we know to model behaviour that we want to see our children adopt. Similarly, showing enthusiasm and interest in another language and its culture can be a spark that opens up a world for a young child and gets them involved.



**Being enthusiastic about language learning and making it fun to learn about other cultures.**

## What we found out - parents' views on their children's language-learning

After asking parents about their own experiences of learning languages, we moved on to ask them how they would like their child's experience with languages to be, compared to theirs.

Here's what we found:

### Key finding:

**90% of parents in the survey think children should start with another language from birth to three years.**

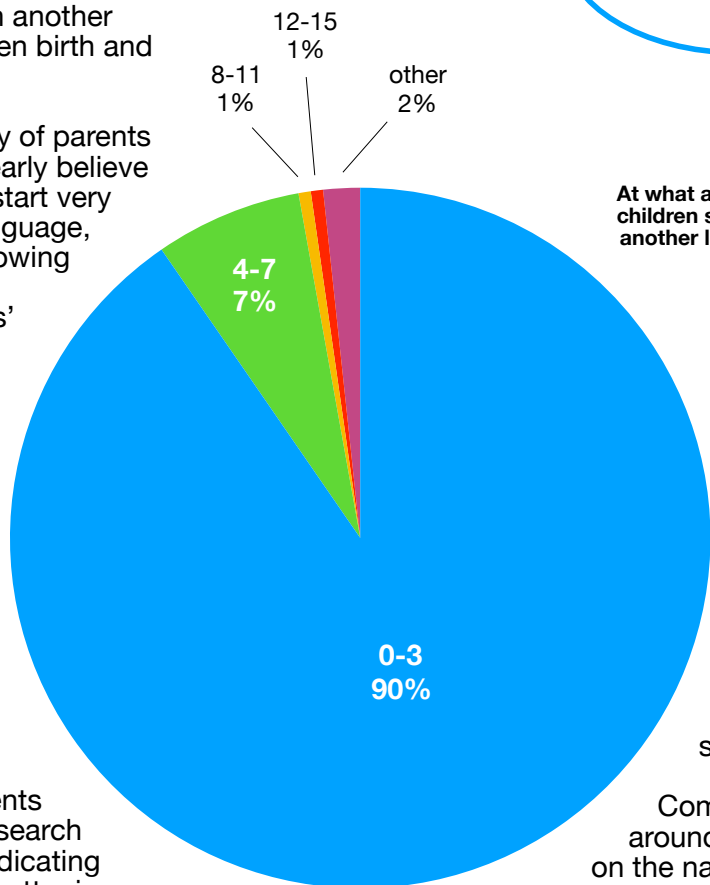
This is the age where they absorb everything like a sponge.

We asked the parents in our survey at what age they think children should start with another language.

7% chose the ages of 4-7 but an overwhelming 90% of parents said that children should start with another language between birth and 3 years.

0-3 is when the brain is most wired for language acquisition.

The vast majority of parents in our survey clearly believe that it's best to start very young with a language, reflecting the growing appreciation of babies', toddlers' and small children's natural abilities as language learners and an increasing desire among parents to encourage their children to feel at ease with other languages from early on in life.



At what age do you think children should start with another language?

I want to make it easier for my daughter by giving her the opportunity to acquire the language instead of learning it.

Parents' comments tie in with the research now available indicating that younger is better in languages because of young children's grasp of the sounds, lack of self-consciousness and - importantly - their

enthusiasm for learning and speaking languages.

Comments we received around this answer centred on the natural learning abilities of babies, how well they absorb things, how their brains are 'wired for language acquisition' and 'wired for learning' in general.

## How parents want to help their children with languages - the top 5 ways:

We asked parents to choose ways they'd help their child with another language.

Here are the top 5 choices - with the percentage who selected them:

### 1. With my own time/input (89%)

Most parents keen on giving their child experience of another language will want to share in the fun and enjoyment themselves.

That's why parents often choose a language they like and know to some extent, so they're refreshing their own language skills at the same time.

Many second-language activities, too, can be mixed in with first-language ones that parents and children would be doing anyway, such as:

- including an extra book in a reading session.

- enjoying songs in two languages instead of just one.

That way parents' time is used well and they are modelling that it's normal and easy to switch between languages.

### 2. By taking them to a country where it's spoken (73%)

It's not surprising that travel figures highly on parents' lists of ways to help with another language - especially at present, when so many people are yearning to get away.

Going to a country where the language is spoken can give a child the widest and most natural experience of seeing and hearing others using a language.

I'm also using books and cartoons with her.

Singing and rhymes so it sticks - and making it fun.

I teach them songs and during the day we listen/watch short educational cartoon movies.

Fun activities in English, e.g. cooking, dancing... so that it's part of their everyday lives.

Watching TV shows they like in that language (Peppa in French is a big hit here!)

Lots and lots of exposure.

We also enrolled her in a nursery that does French lessons.

### 3. By buying resources (70%)

While there are a lot of useful language-related resources available free online, parents in the survey clearly want to supplement these with bought materials such as books, songs and games.

These can save on searching - while adding quality and variety to the time they spend enjoying another language with their child.

### 4. By making it something for the family to share (63%)

You don't need to be part of a bilingual family to enjoy another language with your children and partner.

Songs, rhymes, games and time spent reading together in second language are all fun, family activities. Parents surveyed also used limited screen-time in the language with their over-2s.

### 5. By paying for groups/lessons (49%)

Groups and lessons can be a great way of giving your children some speaking or singing time with a native speaker of the language, together with other children and entertaining activities such as games, rhymes and songs.

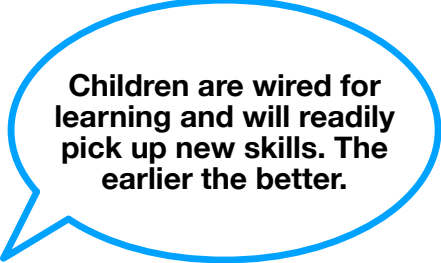
## Conclusions

Overall, our survey results point clearly towards language-learning having better outcomes the earlier in life it starts, particularly for those starting up to the age of 12. Within that age-group, the 0-3 starters had the highest satisfaction levels and rated their interactions as the deepest.

Our parents clearly believe that from birth to three years is the best age to start introducing another language to their little ones, with 90% choosing this option.

They are also keen to make learning another language a fun experience that they share with their children - giving their youngsters plenty of exposure to the language in a range of contexts - from books and songs, groups and classes through to family holidays in places where the language is spoken.

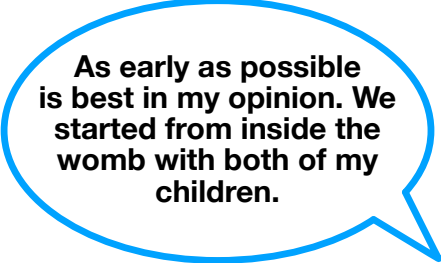
Of course it's possible to learn a language at any time in life. It just seems to be particularly easy for small children and it is this window of opportunity that the parents in our survey are so keen to take advantage of.



**Children are wired for learning and will readily pick up new skills. The earlier the better.**



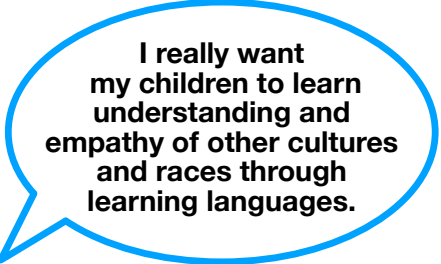
**My kids started at birth.**




**As early as possible is best in my opinion. We started from inside the womb with both of my children.**



**Encourages tolerance and a positive attitude towards others.**



**I really want my children to learn understanding and empathy of other cultures and races through learning languages.**



**I love languages and I'd love for my children to enjoy them too.**

## Spanish 0+ by Baby Listen: spark a love of languages early in life

Spanish 0+ is a top-quality, beautiful and melodic introduction to Spanish for babies, toddlers & young children.

To learn Spanish or any language with true confidence means mastering its sounds - and knowing songs and rhymes enables little ones to do just that, totally naturally. They sing, they repeat - and all the while the sounds are reinforced.

In contrast to much children's music, we've made ours for parents to enjoy too! So mums and dads can un-grit their teeth and share in this fun way into Spanish - a valuable early start during their child's most receptive period for absorbing language sounds.

Spanish 0+ is available on physical and digital formats - find it on Amazon, Etsy, Yoto player and also as an inspiring gift on babylisten.com.



***I'm starting to learn the songs myself and it's great for me to be practising my Spanish too – it's bringing it back to me!***

Miranda, UK

***These songs are perfectly selected, and wonderfully recorded, for little ears.***

Aaron, USA

***A great product that helps you create a playful environment to learn Spanish at home. We already love the selection of songs and rhymes and the design. Thank you!***

Urszula, Poland

***I've bought several music and language CDs for my children and this has been by far the best and the most enjoyed. I would definitely recommend it!***

Nicola, UK



Survey carried out for:

Baby Listen  
babylisten.com

Contact:  
hello@babylisten.com

© 2021 The Natural  
Language Company Ltd.

