



## A Bilingual Education from an Early Age

Nicholas Otten promotes the advantages of learning in multi-lingual schools

**A**fter many years of educating children, there is no doubt in my mind that starting them off at an early nursery age with a bilingual education can have enormous benefits to their development. Aged three, a child's mind is like a sponge, it can more easily absorb new information presented to it than an elder child, and therefore is better equipped to assimilate a second language, as it is not yet conditioned by previous learning. The younger the child, the easier it is.

The beauty of starting early is that you have pretty much a blank sheet of paper to work with, so whatever your nationality is, or

whichever language you speak at home, it is easier. If your child only speaks one language with you and you give him or her a bilingual education this can help to acquire an additional language as part of a natural process.

By immersing your child in a second language on a daily basis at an early age, this not only helps the child to become proficient in this second language but also opens up other opportunities.

Children with a bilingual education are more adaptable. Language is not just about learning sets of words and grammar, it is also learning about another culture. Children who are bi-lingual tend to have a broader outlook and greater awareness of different races and

nationalities. They become more understanding of others, tolerant and aware of the world in general, whilst also gaining self confidence and a sense of responsibility to themselves and to others.

In a world that is constantly changing, communication is becoming increasingly important. Children who are able to communicate with a variety of cultures are the ones who will have more advantages in life.

And there are some practical and cognitive benefits too. Introduced at an early age, a bilingual education has been proven to help develop the brain. Children become able to use two languages at the same time, switching constantly, developing skills in overcoming inhibitions, increasing concentration skills and working memory. Consequentially children who are educated bilingually often perform better on tasks that require multi-tasking, decision making and problem solving, even though the particular situation may have nothing to do with language.

An early start also opens up the possibility of taking on a third language with very much more ease. This will allow you and your child more choices when choosing a secondary school, where the options of A Levels or the International Baccalaureate are available and then further education, be it at a UK university or abroad. It is also a definite advantage for those going abroad for work experience or even a year out.

Being fluent in an extra language can make a candidate stand out from other prospective employees. It can open doors to extra opportunities that others without these skills may miss out on. In today's growing global economy those with a bilingual education have the advantage.

We are now on the cusp of Brexit (or maybe not?) but whichever end game achieved,



we will remain close to Europe, so having a better engrained understanding of other cultures and a fluency of other languages will put our children in a stronger position to successfully address the demands of tomorrow's Europe, both in terms of competitiveness and cooperation.

But not just in Europe. With the development of technology and the internet, and unknown, possibly not yet conceived future technological advances, the world grows ever smaller and comes increasingly closer to our own doorstep, so the importance of understanding other languages and cultures with an agile and receptive mind, developed through a bilingual education, becomes more and more essential. ■

*Nick Otten is the co-Founder of L'Ecole des Petits & L'Ecole de Battersea, bi-lingual schools for three to 11 year olds.*

**ABOVE:** Bilingualism opens many doors

**TOP RIGHT:** Headmaster with pupils at L'Ecole Battersea

**BELOW:** Bilingual children are better at multi-tasking

