Why bilingual education is good for children

**The Local**

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**Parents often worry that bringing up their children bilingual will lead them to fall behind in their first language. But Pam Bremer, director of Obersee Bilingual School, explains that biligualism not only makes children better linguists - it sharpens their brains in other ways too.**

Choosing a school for your children is hard wherever you are. When you are an expat, the choice is even harder. It’s one of the most important decisions you will ever make for your children, yet it can be hard to evaluate the different options available.

Expat parents looking for schools in Switzerland are often seeking a balance between normal Swiss schools and international schools. They want to give their children the chance to integrate into the community, without limiting their future educational choices. They have heard about the advantages that a bilingual education gives children, but wonder whether there might be drawbacks too.

**Bilingual education: brain insurance**

In fact, there is ample research to show that bilingualism gives children social, linguistic and cognitive advantages over their peers. Bilingual children out-perform their monolingual peers in study after study. Research has also shown that the advantages last well into old age –  elderly bilinguals perform as well as younger monolinguals.  In other words, bilingualism is a kind of brain insurance, keeping your mind sharp well into old age.

Balanced bilinguals better comprehend the complexities of language and are more adept at correcting errors in language meaning and grammar. They think more creatively than their monolingual peers and understand the subtle meanings of words. They also demonstrate a more highly developed ability to vary word usage based on the needs of the listener.

Parents sometimes worry that bringing up their children as bilingual will mean that they never really master either language - but these concerns are unfounded. In fact, research shows that children can learn to read in two languages at the same time, to the benefit of performance in both languages. Bilingually educated children are shown to read at a higher level than children educated in only language. Crucial to achieving this is ensuring that the two languages of instruction share the same system – alphabetic or pictoral.

But bilingualism does more than refine children’s linguistic abilities - it also improves their cognitive abilities. In other words, it makes them brainier. The brains of balanced bilingual children have been challenged by the acquisition of two languages to develop simultaneous connections between multiple representations of items, resulting in superior cognitive skills to those of monolinguals. In addition to a natural ability to understand the concept of numbers earlier in age, extensive studies have show that they are more highly skilled in visual problem solving and analytical tests.

**Social advantages**

Bilingual children also gain huge social advantages over their monolingual peers. These advantages are variously cultural, communication and personal. Balanced bilinguals are more comfortable in a multi-cultural environment and are more tolerant and open-minded towards people, cultures and languages. The child grows into an adult who more easily tolerates change, can instinctively attune speaking to the needs of the listener (language and vocabulary) and enjoys the confidence of being able to move freely in multiple environments.

**What is bilingualism?**

True bilingualism can’t be taught; it must be experienced.Successful true bilingualism requires that both languages themselves be the medium of instruction, not just the subject of instruction. Balanced bilinguals are those who have reached a fluent state of performance in both languages. Only at this point do the advantages truly being to be measured. An education that is 90% monolingual with a few hours a week of instruction in another language will not produce the same results.

**Things to think about:**

***An early start -***There is no “critical period” for language acquisition, as had been long believed, but there is an advantageous period for learning a new language. It is easier and quicker for a three year old to reach an age appropriate command of a new language than it is for a 13 year old. Research and experience have shown that children can enter a bilingual program any time before the age of 9 or 10 and still gain the same benefits as those who started earlier.

***Age-appropriate language acquisition -***You must allow two years to acquire age appropriate language skills when starting at a young age. A teenager will require 3-5 years to acquire age-appropriate language skills. Basic social competence comes quickly, but reaching native skill levels in comprehension, command of vocabulary and expression, takes an increasing amount of time the later a child enters bilingual education.

***Language mixing -***Very young bilingual children often mix their languages. This is perfectly normal and does not indicate language confusion. Nor does it indicate that the “primary” language is at a disadvantage. In fact, adult bilinguals also mix languages frequently – using the words that best fit the situation at hand as well as the communication needs of the listener. The child who mixes languages early during the process of becoming bilingual is using words that come easiest to his or her mind, but without regard for the limitations of the listener. Assuming that parents and teachers separate the languages, the child will learn to separate the languages and modify speech according to the communication needs of each person and situation.

***Time****–*Bilingual education works best if you are planning to stay in Switzerland for at least two or three years.

***Social****–*School populations in bilingual schools are more stable – there is less “coming and going” of students, since only those who plan to stay a while in Switzerland choose to join a bilingual school. Often about a third of the families are local families, providing a direct link to the local community.

***Curriculum*** – This varies between schools, but most offer a combined local and international curriculum. Parents should look for a school which  will prepare their child to enter Swiss, bilingual or international secondary schools.

***Current language***– ‘But my child is not already bilingual’: this is a concern expressed by many parents. In fact, most bilingual schools will take monolingual children up until primary grade 3, arranging extra support so that the children can catch up in the new language.

***Too much for the child?***– A bilingual education provides an interesting and valuable challenge for any child who shows normal cognitive and language development. A bilingual program is often the perfect choice for the gifted child, who might become bored in a monolingual program.

***Class Size***– Class sizes should be between 12- 18 children of similar ages in order to meet the social needs of the children. Classes of mixed ages that are smaller than this often lead to children being unable to make satisfying friendships.

***Stability****–* The school should implement professional financial planning procedures and should have a large enough student population to ensure that it will continue to operate into the extended future.

***Independence*** – Does the school have investors that want a return on investment, or is it independent of such concerns?

***Learning difficulties***– Children with diagnosed learning difficulties are usually overwhelmed when taking on the additional challenges of a bilingual education. Bilingual education is not recommended for children who have learning disabilities.

***Sport, music***– A good bilingual school will offer a program that includes music and sport enrichment.

***Additional services*** – A successful choice of school means that it fits in with the life you lead. Are both parents working? Do you wish to meet other families through the school? Do you wish to have a choice of  before and after school care, holiday care, after school classes, family events and newsletters?

**How does bilingual education work?**

**The best chance for success**

The best method of bilingual education “immerses” children without “submersing” them. Typical rules specify the use of many contextual clues (pictures, body language), separation of languages, and excellent coordination and planning among teachers that includes careful repetition of key vocabulary in both languages. For new children starting such a program at a later stage in their school careers, intensive tutoring is required in order to give the child a jump-start in the new language, and rigorous testing in the new language must be delayed for some time to allow the child a chance to catch up with the others (which he or she will certainly do).

**Individualized learning**

Many private bilingual schools give children the chance to learn at an earlier age, and at a pace that suits their individual interests, ensuring that the love of learning thrives throughout their school career.

**Gradual language independence**

In pre-kindergarten the bilingual experience usually includes near simultaneous translation of information and instruction, along with many songs, pictures, stories and games in both languages. Children may speak either language, but are encouraged to try new words and phrases. Songs, stories, games, dance, music and theater play an important role in the pre-kindergarten experience.

In kindergarten and primary grades, the separation between the languages increases. A common practice is to conduct the first half of the week in German and the second half in English. The children are carefully introduced to new vocabulary in both languages in such a way that they can absorb information easily. Songs, stories games, dance, music and theatre play an important role in kindergarten.

At upper school levels, the language of instruction varies by subject matter and can change from year to year. For example mathematics might be taught in English one year and in German the following year.

**Transfer at anytime**

Studies and experience show that children leaving a bilingual school are able to transfer to other schools with no more difficulty than would normally be encountered when changing schools, countries, cantons or school systems.