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ANSWERS  
FOR PARENTS  
ABOUT FRENCH  
IMMERSION 

# DO CHILDREN NEED ABOVE AVERAGE ACADEMIC ABILITY TO SUCCEED IN IMMERSION?

Learners with diverse learning abilities and needs do as well in French immersion as they might in English programs, and they gain the additional benefit of learning another language. Researchers have found that diverse learners (including those with lower academic ability or particular learning needs) in French immersion perform at the same level as diverse learners in the English program on English language and academic achievement tests, and some actually outperform them on second-language tests.<sup>1</sup>

# WHAT ARE THE EMPLOYMENT BENEFITS OF COMPLETING AN IMMERSION PROGRAM?

Bilinguals have access to a wider range of national and international jobs. Highlighting French and English language skills provides jobseekers with a greater competitive advantage, particularly in areas such as admin/finance, human resources/recruiting, training/education, technical support/customer service and marketing. A 2010 study at Guelph University found that bilinguals earned on average between 3.8% (males) and 6.6% (females) more than their unilingual counterparts.<sup>2</sup> Thousands of industries and organizations operate in more than one language, such as travel, hospitality, import/export, as well as the public service sector. All of these areas require and value linguistic and intercultural skills afforded by having learned other languages. Those who have fluency on other languages have access to more opportunities, face less competition for roles, and earn higher wages.



## HOW DOES IMMERSION DIFFER FROM OTHER SECOND LANGUAGE PROGRAMS?

French immersion programs use the target language for instruction and as a means of communication – learning language through content. The time and intensity of learning in this context means that learners acquire language much more effectively than when the target language is learned as one subject among many others. An immersive approach allows students to learn a second language in a similar manner to the way that they have learned their first.



## HOW PROFICIENT WILL MY CHILD BE?

Learners in French immersion programs generally attain a level of proficiency that exceeds that of a core program, thanks to the time and intensity involved. Recent testing in some Canadian school boards has shown that French immersion students in Grade 12 generally succeed at a B2 level on the international DELF assessment, which means they can interact effectively with native French speakers as well as understand and produce complex oral and written texts.<sup>3</sup> The intensive exposure to the target language allows students to quickly reach the level of proficiency required to learn their subjects in the new language. High school French immersion graduates should be able to work in or pursue post-secondary studies in French.



## WILL AN IMMERSION PROGRAM HAVE AN ADVERSE EFFECT ON MY CHILD'S ENGLISH-LANGUAGE SKILLS?

Learners can add a second language at no cost to their English or first language competence because languages are interdependent: skills developed in the second language are used in the first language and vice versa. English language arts are introduced in the middle elementary years, and family and community also reinforce first language skills<sup>4</sup>. 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".<sup>5</sup> In fact, French 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.<sup>6</sup>



## CAN MY CHILD REALLY LEARN MATH AND SCIENCE IN A SECOND LANGUAGE?

Reviews of research studies found that French 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, French immersion students did as well as or achieved at a significantly higher level than those in the regular program.<sup>5,6,7,8,9</sup>

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

## WHY SHOULD I CHOOSE IMMERSION 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 use more than one language and understand other cultures is not the only benefit of a French immersion education. Research shows that students gain additional cognitive, academic and employment benefits.

## **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<sup>10</sup> found that the majority of French immersion graduates surveyed reported no difficulty in adjusting to university courses offered in English. In fact, French 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?

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 on relevant features when there is distractive information. Bilinguals demonstrate more cognitive flexibility and perform better on tasks requiring mental manipulation. Their verbal expression shows originality, non-verbal intelligence and can answer open-ended questions more freely than monolinguals.<sup>2</sup> As well, they demonstrate increased sensitivity to others and a heightened awareness, receptivity and appreciation of language. There is some evidence to suggest that bilinguals 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 among people and their cultures and may be able to communicate with a large variety of people.<sup>2</sup>



## HOW CAN I HELP MY CHILD IF I DON'T KNOW THE LANGUAGE?

French immersion teachers know that many parents don't understand the target language. You can help make your child's language-learning 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 French immersion programs. Remember that most skills learned in the first language are transferred to the second (or third). 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, find educational websites, watch second-language TV with your child, and expose your child to second-language events and activities like cultural/community events, sports activities, summer/weekend immersive experiences, etc.



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