

Young children naturally love to experiment with sounds and words and introducing a new language, is an extension of this exploration. Learning a second language has a major beneficial effect on the long-term successful outcomes for the child, as it increases the plasticity of the brain. Current research suggests that for the optimum benefits to accrue, the earlier children start the second language the better. We know that children learn best when having fun in a relaxed, supportive, professional and child-friendly environment. I believe the keys to success, which will enable children to enjoy and achieve language skills, are fun, fun and more fun.

I have been teaching French to beginners of all ages for many years, having started my teaching career in Brighton as a French specialist within the state primary sector. Since those early days, when I also wrote and broadcast radio programmes for primary children on BBC Radio Brighton, I have worked in both the state and private sector and now run a successful teaching business. I teach French to all ages and am currently working with several families who are planning to relocate to France. However, nothing is as challenging but as rewarding as working with little ones. Their capacity for learning is infinite, their enthusiasm for learning is infectious and they are like little sponges, absorbing the new language with ease.

There are many French clubs held locally. How do you find a good one? Word of mouth is always a useful starting point, but libraries and the ABC magazine will carry adverts of those held locally too. Speak to the person who is running the club and ask what experience he or she has had with this age group and if they are a qualified teacher and CRB checked. Ask if you can attend a taster session with your child before committing yourself to a whole term. This will enable you to see if it is the kind of environment and experience in which your child will thrive. There is a debate about whether children should be immersed in French right from the start or whether the learning experience should be conducted in English too. If young children are attending a weekly French club, I feel strongly that they need to feel secure. Speaking to them entirely in French for the whole time could be very unsettling. In my clubs for children aged 2+, I increase the amount of French I speak when I am sure that the children are relaxed with me and can understand some of the phrases I use. We do silly things like calling an apple, a 'pommetiddlyompompompom'. In this way, the children soon remember that an apple is 'une pomme'.

Language courses for little ones generally start with learning to introduce themselves, and to say 'Bonjour' and 'Au revoir.' They introduce the numbers, colours, names of toys, animals and days of the week. Language structures are developed from this base.

People enquiring about my French clubs ask what we do. We don't have a 'syllabus,' but themes, which are led and developed according to the children's interests. The clubs are either run in my home, which is also a Nursery School, or in another Nursery setting. We play with cars, dolls and playdough. We paint and we build with bricks. We enjoy all sorts of games and we play and explore in the garden.

Through participating in a wide variety of activities, the children are actively involved in their learning and very quickly grasp the vocabulary that will be important to them when they meet little French friends. They learn to introduce themselves with the help of games and songs and they master how to ask for the bread when they go to the bakers. They start to communicate by repeating, understanding and recognising short phrases. Music plays an important part in my clubs and I write lots of songs for the children, inspired by what they say and do. We learn about French culture through reading French stories and meeting characters such as 'Barbar the elephant' and 'Barbapapa' who changes shape. We also taste French food. "J'aime le chocolat," said one child drinking a cup of 'chocolat chaud'. This was evidently a highlight of the session for him.

Parents support of their children's French behind the scenes is invaluable. If you don't speak French yourself, there are lots of children's products from which to choose. Children are excited at the prospect of trying out their French, even if they are somewhat shy at first. With Eurostar and the Shuttle, you can easily take them to France to practice what they have learnt and enable them to hear real French. There is Nausica  in Boulogne just 30 minutes from the Tunnel exit: a bigger version of Brighton Sea Life Centre and there are restaurants close by, which make children very welcome. The beaches near the tunnel exit are superb, with miles of sand and lots of opportunities to search for crabs and mussels in the rock pools. Building sandcastles on the beach, the children will soon find other children joining in. How exciting it will be when they say, "Bonjour, comment t'appelles-tu? Je m'appelle Tom/Lucy," as they start to make French friends.

French Clubs for the under-fives are a springboard for learning French. They give a child the thrill and excitement of speaking another language, building their confidence and self-esteem. All children like to count and show you what they can say and sing in French. They are justifiably proud of their achievements. With encouragement at home to support what they are learning in their French club, an early introduction to French may well set your child on the road to a love of languages and a lifetime of fun and excitement in being able to mix and socialise with people of other cultures. The added bonus being that it will enhance your child's overall learning too. It's an opportunity too good to miss.

Janet is the author of the 'minilingo' range of French and two activity books 'At home with French' and 'At home with Spanish' published by Oxford University Press.

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