

Strategies for “coaching” your child

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Developing fluency in a second language confers many benefits, and not just in terms of employment, travel, and leisure opportunities. Research shows that it enhances cognitive (thinking) skills, strengthens first-language skills and heightens awareness and appreciation of language.¹ It develops sensitivity to the communication needs of others, and it makes learning a third language easier.

These benefits aren’t just for students who find school easy! Both research and experience have shown that the immersion approach to language learning is suitable for a variety of learners. Alberta Education states, “Students with special needs are entitled to appropriate quality education that will allow them to develop to their full potential and be self-reliant, responsible, caring and contributing members of society. The French immersion program can provide this quality education to special needs students when classroom instruction is tailored to meet individual needs.”²

Regardless of the program, children learn differently and need confidence to work effectively in their learning environment. All students have both strengths and needs, and some children will struggle in any program. Many factors—physical, intellectual, educational, cultural, emotional, social— influence a child’s ability to learn. A French immersion student experiencing a difficulty or disability will likely experience the same problem in the English program. As well, transferring out of immersion may damage a child’s self-image or confidence—and the stigma of failure could even compound the learning problem.



First steps

Your first step should be to establish good communications with the teacher(s). Try to gain an understanding of what is happening in the classroom and what possibilities exist within the school setting.³

You’ll also want to have your child’s vision tested, and consider whether something like fatigue, diet, allergies, or a particular stress in his life might be interfering with learning and needs to be taken into account by everyone working with your child.⁴

Help beyond the school

Even when their children are doing well at school, immersion parents—the great majority of whom know little or no French—often worry about their ability to help with homework. It’s important to remember that homework is additional practice of what has been introduced in the classroom. Don’t underestimate the importance of ensuring your child has the necessary time, tools and environment for that practicing. Your role, then, is to be a monitor, a coach and a cheerleader.

(Remember also that the immersion parent is saved from the trap of doing the child’s homework for him!)

If your child needs additional help with some aspect of learning, you might:

1. hire a tutor—a high school student or a teacher—or contact a tutoring agency (ideally, the tutoring would be done in French, but, if that isn’t possible, do remember that skills learned in English will transfer to French)
2. have a peer or a friend work with your child
3. help your child yourself by attempting various strategies such as those listed below.⁵

Reading

- ✓ Tune-up your child’s ears to hear the differences between similar sounds by playing games with sounds⁶; have him copy out rhymes, saying the words as he’s writing; have him match pictures whose names rhyme.
- ✓ Coach your child to use the following strategies when she has difficulty with a word:
 - Is there a little word in it that I know?
 - Are there parts of the word that I do know, like *au, eau, ou, tion*?
 - I can try to divide it into syllables and then try to pronounce each syllable.
 - I can read ahead, then go back and reread the sentence and think about what word would fit.
 - I can look for clues in the picture on the page.
 - I can get my mouth moving to form (silently) the first few sounds in a word (e.g. *skipping: s-k-i-pping*).

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¹ See, for example, “Cognitive Benefits of FSL Education” in CPF’s report *The State of French-Second Language Education in Canada 2006* (pages 8-9 at www.cpf.ca/english/Resources/FSL2006/CPFSummaryE.pdf)

² See “Can French Immersion offer an appropriate quality education for a student with special needs?” at www.education.gov.ab.ca/french/adtscol/firlmm/

³ See “How are problems approached?” (pages 106-108) as well as “How can I get the most from parent-teacher conferences?” and “How can I keep in touch with the school?” (pages 59-64) in *Yes, You Can Help!*

For extra support for almost independent Grade 2 and 3 readers, see CPF’s *Peer Tutoring Literacy Program* under “Resources” at www.cpf.ca.

⁴ See “Why isn’t my child happy at school?” in *Yes, You Can Help!* (pages 98-100)

⁵ “Teaching Students with Learning Disabilities” has additional strategies that parents might consider. It can be ordered from the Alberta Education Learning Resource Center at www.lrc.learning.gov.ab.ca or by phoning (780) 427-2767 (for toll-free access first dial 310-0000).

⁶ Such as *b/p/d/t* and *m/n*. Start with end sounds, then beginning and then middle. For example, “I spy, with my little eye, something that has a *mm* sound in the middle.”

- ✓ Coach the beginning reader to stop at periods, pause at commas, lift her voice at question marks.
- ✓ If you feel confident enough in your French, read aloud together with your child. Be expressive so that the text sounds interesting.
- ✓ Record your child while he's reading, then have him read the passage again while listening to the recording. This will help him hear his own mistakes and encourage him to correct himself.
- ✓ Have your child read her own written work out loud.
- ✓ Work with your child on recognizing high-frequency words (e.g., *of, have, done, said, do, been...*).
- ✓ Two techniques to help the emerging reader with comprehension:
 - TELLS:
 - Title - think about the title of the story
 - Examine and skim pages to discover what the story is about
 - Look for important words
 - Look for hard words
 - Setting - think about it
 - Imagine a picture of the story in your mind and then describe it.
- ✓ Encourage your child to talk about what he has read, or to draw a picture about it.
- ✓ Encourage the more advanced reader to read the newspaper and keep you abreast of current events. Always ask questions.

(For tips on choosing French reading materials for your child, go to www.cpfalta.ab.ca and under "For parents" click on "Literacy development in French immersion" and then "Gifts of literacy...".)

Writing

- ✓ To help overcome writer's block, have your child tell a story aloud while you record it (on a tape, using video camera, or just by writing it down as he speaks).
- ✓ Have her write about a picture; when she's older, show her how to develop story boards.
- ✓ Encourage your child to:
 - keep a journal or diary
 - write captions, headlines or commentaries
 - illustrate stories or events
 - think about a character, search for details about him and speculate about his behaviour.

(For ways in which parents with no knowledge of French can coach their children to be more successful with their writing assignments, go to www.cpfalta.ab.ca and under "For parents" click on "Literacy development in French immersion".)

Mathematics

- ✓ Coach your child to use the following strategies for problem-solving:
 - use objects (such as beans) to work with numerical concepts
 - read the question aloud and then paraphrase it aloud by stating the important information

- state the problem and underline the important information
- visualize the information and draw a representation of the problem
- hypothesize the number of steps and write the necessary operational signs
- do a simple example of the same problem
- estimate the answer
- show the calculation and circle the answer
- check the steps for accuracy.
- ✓ Incorporate mathematics concepts and problem-solving into daily experiences.

Learning skills

Finally, here are a few strategies to support learning in any subject area. Watch for more suggestions for coaching your child in a future edition of the *CPF Alberta News*.

- ✓ Have your child verbalize what he has learned. Telling someone else gets him to organize his thoughts and put it into his own words.
- ✓ Encourage her to make notes of what has been heard, use the information and practice frequently. What is critical to transferring information is using it often or being motivated to remember it.
- ✓ Give your child hands-on experiences. Share examples. Find "real-life" ways to illustrate concepts.
- ✓ Have your child be involved in activities such as drama or music: they're great "cross-training" for the brain.

What are the early warning signs?

According to *Yes, You Can Help! Information and Inspiration for French Immersion Parents* (published by Alberta Education in 2002), following are some signals that you should confer with the teacher:

- kindergarten - your child often has difficulty expressing him/herself clearly in his first language (that is, he can't get his meaning across) or difficulty articulating some sounds in his mother tongue
- grade 1 - difficulty paying attention even for short periods of time
 - unable to echo words and phrases in French
 - very little letter/sound recognition
- grade 2 - there is very little word identification
 - difficulty paying attention for extended periods of time
- grade 3 - often has difficulty understanding or recalling the information from a story she hears or reads
 - often has difficulty giving information about something he has just seen or experienced
 - difficulty with phonetic analysis of words
- grade 4/5 - still reversing letters
 - difficulty with phonetic analysis hinders comprehension
- at any time - continuing unhappiness at school
 - ongoing behavioural or social problems
 - sudden changes in behaviour
 - obvious lack of confidence
 - definite lack of interest in learning French