

# Primary Advice

By Helene J. Uchida

**Q:** At what age do you think it is appropriate for children to start English lessons? Parents of 2-year-olds have asked me to teach their children. I think this is too young. What do you think about this?

T.Y., school owner  
Wakayama

## A. It's never too early for children to start learning a second language

I don't think it is ever too soon. According to a report on early childhood development by the Institute of Medicine and the National Research Council of the United States, the capacity to learn a language is optimal from the 34th week of pregnancy until 12 months, during the period when the brain's synapses are forming.

Whether the child is 6 months, 1 year or 2 years old is not the issue — the issue is whether the teacher has the patience, know-how, materials, activities, ideas and temperament for super-early English nourishment.

I use the word "nourishment" because in the early years, youngsters are learning their own native tongue, and in some cases, a second language, subconsciously. They are in the pre-production stage, which means they are absorbing rather than producing the language(s) they are exposed to.

This process allows them to acquire language daily and store it as receptive vocabulary that will emerge when the timing is right.

What this means for the teacher is that you may not receive the gratification of hearing your very young learners reproduce your input, which means you will have few indications of whether they are learning. But rest assured they are indeed absorbing it.

According to Stephen Krashen, most new learners of English experience a "silent period" in which they do not speak because they need time to listen, digest, observe, and build receptive vocabulary, and internally respond to what they hear and see.

Is this age group right for you? You clearly have had experience with older children, so you know that preparation and follow-through are necessary for successful lessons. If you like infants and toddlers and are willing to research, plan and organize for this new adventure, I encourage you to give it a go. You have nothing to lose and lots to learn.

My suggestions are:

- \* Start with a 30-minute class and expand to 45 minutes later.
- \* Toddlers should always be accompanied by a parent.
- \* Find a good CD & DVD with lots of simple songs.

Play the CD in class and ask the parents to play the DVD at home.

- \* Create a "treasure chest" of props you can use in class: puppets/dolls/toys/stuffed animals/grab bags /costumes/mirrors/color blocks/plastic fruit and vegetables/simple puzzles.
- \* Make a library of picture books with hard pages and /or sound effects/fold-outs that have an element of suspense and surprise.
- \* Flash cards: Laminate flashcards with ABCs/colors/ fruit/zoo animals/farm animals/vehicles/body parts /numbers.
- \* Hang colorful posters low on the wall so children can touch the visuals as you call them out.

A Little America teacher told us about a child who was an infant when our teacher began lessons. The child was present at all the weekly 30-minute lessons over the years, but never uttered a word. When our teacher taught his last class and said farewell to the students, the 3-year-old spoke to him for the first time. Our teacher said his eyes watered and it was his finest moment in teaching.

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Readers are encouraged to send questions to Helene J. Uchida on any themes related to teaching English to younger learners — particularly those at the elementary school level — to [jn-edu@yomiuri.com](mailto:jn-edu@yomiuri.com) with "Primary Advice" in the subject line. Questions to Uchida are also accepted via postcard at "Primary Advice," The Japan News, 1-7-1 Otemachi, Chiyoda Ward, Tokyo 100-8055. Questions should preferably be written in English, accompanied by your name, occupation and the area in which you live.



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*The next installment will appear on Dec. 11.*