

## Cultural diversity pays off, for kids of all ages



Very young children from culturally diverse neighborhoods showed a greater willingness to learn from adults who spoke a language different from their parents', a new study has found. (Larry Williams, Blend Images)

**By Leslie Mann,**  
Chicago Tribune

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**Y**our child may be engrossed with his Baby Einstein Take-Along Tunes or trying to escape from the grocery cart. But he's listening, processing and willing to teach us.

In a recent study of 19-month-olds, University of Chicago doctoral student Lauren Howard found that children who heard multiple languages in their neighborhoods were more receptive to people who spoke languages other than their parents' language.

"We measured imitation. At this age, that's how they show us their willingness to learn," explained Howard, the lead author of the report titled Neighborhood Linguistic Diversity Predicts Infants' Social Learning. The experiments tested how well the infants could learn new tasks from a non-English speaker.

The study, which included 82 children from the Chicago and Washington areas, was published in the November issue of *Cognition*.

"Babies are not only affected by parents and caregivers — previous studies proved that — but also by people they hear at the store or on the bus," Howard said. "Incidental exposure matters."

Does this mean kids in diverse communities will grow up to have open minds?

"It's a start," Howard said. "Already, at this age, they're actively learning."

### **Diverse by design**

This is familiar territory for many adoptive families, said Adam Pertman, president of the Boston-based National Center on Adoption and Permanency.

"Adoption is a good prism to understand issues like this because adoptive families have a 'laboratory' where they see this daily — not just with international adoption, but with interracial adoption," said Pertman.

While studies like Howard's suggest that parents increase their children's cultural exposure, "adoptive parents have been making these efforts for years and sociologists have been studying them for years," said Pertman.

Mary Child and her husband, David Youtz, of Tenafly, N.J., are raising their four daughters, all adopted from China, in a multicultural community by intention. The benefits extend beyond language, Child said. Her 19-year-old daughter, Sophie, speaks English and is learning Mandarin, and her 10-year-old triplets speak English, are studying Spanish and will take Mandarin lessons in middle school.

One reason Sophie appreciated the diverse high school she attended, said Child, is because "the kids there defied expectations, like she did. One student, for example, had parents who were Korean and Danish, but he spoke Swedish. Not all the kids looked like their parents, either."

### **Seeking diversity**

Cultural diversity can be within reach, even in unlikely areas. Although she grew up in "not very diverse" Beaver Dam, Wis., Morgan Butterbrodt, 23, said she learned about other languages and cultures from the many students her family hosted through the AFS-USA international student exchange program ([afsusa.org](http://afsusa.org)).

"It's the little differences that make you more compassionate and less judgmental," Butterbrodt said. "Yuilya from Kazakhstan, for example, was very disciplined because she couldn't go to college unless her grades were good. Matias from Paraguay wasn't used to being on time because his culture is more laid-back."

For families unable to host a student for a whole year, AFS-USA offers other volunteer opportunities, such as being "welcome families" to ease students' transitions.

But there are countless ways to expose kids to other cultures, said Homa Sabet Tavangar, author of "Growing Up Global: Raising Children to be at Home in the World" (Ballantine); her website is [growingupglobal.net](http://growingupglobal.net).

Just a few of her tips: Take the kids to foreign films. Sample ethnic restaurants. Put a world map on the wall, with a thumbtack on every country the kids learn about. Help your children's teachers make global classrooms. Encourage the kids to invite friends of other cultures for dinner. If your native tongue is not English, use it with the kids, added Tavangar, who is bilingual. "They'll thank you later," she said.

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