

WHY EARLY?

Because the window is open — and it will not stay open forever.

Teacher Rayla Allertsen · I Can Read Series · SUPERSchool.global

I am learning Italian.

And I have watched what happens the moment ... that AHA moment!

Not because I always wanted to. Because in 2020 I married a Norwegian-born Italian national, and to become a citizen of his country, I need to pass a B1 language examination. So here I am — a career educator who has spent decades teaching young children how to read — sitting with Italian alphabet cards, learning numbers, colors, the parts of a house. Simple grammar. Starting from zero. Exactly like a preschooler.

And I will tell you this honestly: **it is hard**. My brain does not absorb Italian the way a three-year-old absorbs language. Every word requires work. Every phrase needs to be heard many times before it begins to feel natural. The neural pathways that carry a new language do not form quickly anymore. They have to be built, deliberately, through repetition and meaningful use — the way you lay bricks one by one.

A child does this without even knowing it is work. **That is the gift of early**. And it is precisely what I have spent my life trying to give to every child I could reach.

What I Read in 1997 - and Never Forgot

Somewhere in my home I still have a copy of *Time Magazine* from February 1997 — the Asia edition, its cover story titled "A Child's Brain." I remember reading it and feeling something shift in me. As someone who had always believed, instinctively, that early mattered, here was science saying: **yes — and the window closes**.

One line stayed with me across nearly thirty years: after the age of ten, if a child has not been introduced to a language, they will never speak it like a native.

The research since then has only sharpened that finding. In 2018, researchers from MIT and Harvard analyzed data from nearly 670,000 English speakers and concluded that **native-like language proficiency requires exposure beginning no later than age ten to twelve**. After that, the learning curve does not disappear — but it slopes, and it keeps sloping. The accent, the grammar, the instinctive feel for a language: these belong to those who began early. The rest of us work harder for less.

I know, because I am working at it right now, in Italian, at an age that shall remain between me and my language tutor.

What the Brain Does in the First Five Year

A baby is born with virtually all the brain cells they will ever have — one hundred billion neurons, waiting. The brain at birth is a quarter of adult size. **By age one, it has doubled. By age three, it is eighty percent of adult size. By age five — when many children are just entering formal school — it is ninety percent.** Nearly full-grown. And yet most of the world still treats those first five years as preparation for learning, rather than as learning itself.

The story is not size. The story is **connections**. Every time a young child is spoken to, read to, sung to — neurons fire and reach toward each other. Synapses form. Pathways open. At its peak, the young brain is building one million new neural connections every single second. No other period in a human life comes close.

The pathways formed in these early years — for language, for reasoning, for attention — are the ones that last. The ones built later cost far more effort for the same result. I know this from the research. And I know it from my Italian homework.

Why “Later” Is Not Neutral

I have heard it many times from loving, well-meaning parents: *"She is only three. There is time."* I understand. Childhood should be childhood — playful, unhurried, full of wonder. The best early reading instruction feels exactly like play. What I am gently pushing back on is the idea that waiting costs nothing.

It costs the connections that were not made. The language sounds the ear stopped being able to distinguish. Economist James Heckman, Nobel laureate and one of the world's foremost researchers on early childhood, has demonstrated that the return on investment in early education outperforms almost any other social expenditure — and that gaps opened by delayed early learning **widen over time**. They do not quietly close on their own.

The child who was not spoken to, read to, introduced to the sounds and structures of language early does not simply start behind. They start with a different brain architecture than they could have had. I say this not to scare you. I say this because I love children and want only the best for them — **AND** because I have seen what early makes possible.

What “EARly” Actually Looks Like

Early is not pressure. It is not drills before breakfast. It is **presence**.

It is a parent who talks to their infant as though the infant understands every word — because at a neurological level, far more is being absorbed than we can see. It is reading aloud. Singing. Naming things. Pointing. Asking. Answering. All the ordinary, loving acts of simply being with a child are, in fact, the building blocks of the reading brain.

And when the time comes for formal reading instruction — for most children, between ages four and six — it must be done **the right way**: systematically, phonics first, sound by sound and blend by blend.

Every morning I sit with my Italian materials, I think about the children in my classroom. The ones I cupped by the face, looked in their eyes, and said: *You can do this. Sound it. Blend it. Read it.* I think about how easily those connections formed when the brain was still in its great window of readiness. How a six-year-old absorbs in one morning what takes me a week of effort.

The greatest gift you can give a child is not a toy, not a gadget, not the most expensive school in the city. It is language — ~~given early, given lovingly, with the understanding that every word you read to them,~~ every sound you teach them, every page you turn together is building something **that will be there for life**.

After love — why not give your child the gift of language early?

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