What language should Baby speak?

I entered parenthood fluent in three languages. Having spoken German with my grandfather as a child, I looked forward to using my linguistics training and degree with my own children. That idea was quickly squashed by our family pediatrician, who sternly took me to task for speaking Russian to our infant daughter: “You’ll confuse her. Her mental development will be stunted. The mishmash of sounds will impede her speech.”

Well, I knew a lot about language but very little about child development, so I turned off my Russian and spoke English only to our children.

I now know that our doctor had parroted very old opinions, probably originating around 1900 during the wave of immigrants to the US. Growing up with two languages was thought to condemn a child to speaking neither well and doom them to poverty. Today, we recognize the value of language learning from a very young age.

Each of our children, now grown, has studied various languages and lived and worked abroad. *Studied* is the operative word. Whereas children who arrive at school speaking more than one language need classroom instruction in *both* languages to learn proper grammar, spelling, and usage, they already have the vocabulary, sounds, and word order that can be so difficult to acquire later. I kick myself when I think of how much our children could have benefited from my training!

Children who grow up in bi- or trilingual families have brains that perform more efficiently than those of monolinguals. The second language seems to improve the executive functioning of the brain. As the child’s brain switches between languages and decides which one is appropriate, the brain is learning how to handle other types of complex problems.

An additional language also provides an additional world view. There are words in many languages that are difficult or impossible to translate. They arise from a different way of viewing our reality. This is beneficial for artists, diplomats, business people, and anyone who interacts with people outside their immediate circle.

The advantages of learning a language can, of course, be acquired through study at any age, and the benefits are similar–just not as pronounced. There is a reason people are concerned when a new US ambassador arrives at a posting speaking only English!

The benefits follow a language learner into old age. Tamar Gollan of the University of California, San Diego led a study that found that the onset of dementia and other symptoms of Alzheimer’s disease were delayed in bilinguals.

I wish I could tell that pediatrician what I know now: that learning multiple languages can make a person smarter, healthier, more successful, and more empathetic. The more we learn to communicate with one another, the more everyone benefits!