

Just 15 minutes of German daily with your child (or partner) at home!

(This article was published originally aimed at folk learning Dutch, by author Renée Feikema. It was translated with the author's permission, for our German audience, by Conny Koenderink who speaks both Dutch and German fluently.)

There is no such thing as someone who is bad at languages! Just someone who hasn't yet discovered the right way to learn!

I have seen and taught students for whom language learning is quite addictive. It is awesome to be bilingual! When a child learns German and continues to build on this at an early age, the impact is enormous. Intellectual development and appreciation of the worth of another culture are nurtured. Interaction with other German speakers becomes incredibly rewarding and so much fun! Never doubt the pleasure principle of learning another language.

Most importantly language learning encourages good communication and articulation skills. It is also well documented that speaking another language helps you understand and write English better. Believe me when I say that so many students have informed me of this fact!

I like to think that if children are exposed early on to German (or any other language), they will develop another mind- set and appreciate some of that country's customs. A child becomes more respectful to and tolerant of people of other nationalities and grows up valuing diversity.

Personally I have always maintained throughout my years of teaching languages that, in this present world, people would be a lot less racist and intolerant if they spoke another language.

Children need to become aware of their German heritage in the first instance. Students have frequently asked me: 'How do I go about learning German in a communicative and practical way at home? You can't just say 'Let's speak German at the dinner table tonight!' It won't work without some sort of structure (unless you are a fluent speaker). So I have set out a guide, and it is only a guide, which can be adapted in any way you wish.

Set aside 15 minutes of time a day, and meal times are a good time generally, to speak German. And only German may be spoken in those 15 minutes! It must be totally simple and doable! 15 minutes is not long and the results will amaze you. Repetition is the key.

You do not need to be a native speaker to teach a child German effectively. That you may make a few mistakes in your own German is not an issue. You just need to be a little creative! A German-speaking parent, sibling or other member of the family in the home must be able to lead the two simple lessons I have outlined below at the dinner table or wherever.

These lessons may also be used by an adult starting to learn German!

I have often found that children or adults know words or expressions they did not realise they knew! Self-confidence in a non-threatening environment is rapidly gained and it spreads to other learning areas too!

The two lessons below are just suggestions on how to start speaking German for a mere 15 minutes a day. Consistent repetition of very simple words is the key and the time limit of 15 minutes means it is possible. Vocabulary is instantly broadened without using more complicated grammar patterns.

You must adhere to these simple communicative rules if it is to work!

Lesson 1: pointing to things you normally have on the table at dinner time (not food yet)

das Glas, ein Glas Wasser, der Teller, die Gabel, das Messer, der Loeffel, die Flasche, die Tasse, etc.

Question: Was ist das?

Question/ answer: Ist das ein Messer? Nein, das ist eine Gabel. Ist das ein Loeffel? Nein, das ist ein Teller.

Pointing: Hier ist eine Gabel, dort is ein Glas, wo ist das Wasser?

Zeig mir das Glas! Zeig mir den Loeffel!

Remember to move objects on the table around.

Lesson 2: again pointing to things you are eating and drinking at the time

Questions: Was isst Du? Was isst Mama? Was isst Papa? Was isst Du, Papa / Mama?

Answers: Ich / Mama / Papa essen: Kartoffeln, Karotten, Eis, Salat, Brokkoli, Bohnen, Fleisch, Reis, Brot, Tomaten, Fruechte, etc.

Ich trinke Wasser, ich trinke Milch, Papa und Mama trinken Wein

Question /answer: Was moechtest Du haben? Ich moechte gerne Wasser haben. Moechtest Du Fisch haben? etc.

Some simple expressions for both lessons but NO MORE than these to begin with:

Guten Appetit!

Zu Tisch bitte!

Hast Du Hunger? Hast Du Durst?

Ja ich habe Hunger / Durst.

Setz' Dich!

Ich weiss es nicht ! (if they don't know a word) Was ist das?

Koenntest Du mir bitte etwas Fleisch geben?

Darf ich bitte ein Eis haben?

Das ist sehr lecker!

Vielen Dank.

Hoer' auf!

The next step is to add the negative:

Ich moechte keine Milch, ich moechte keinen Fisch, ich habe keinen Teller, ich habe keinen Loeffel.

The 'kein' construction is more difficult, particularly for an adult student, but by dint of repetition this will come quite naturally. As with any language structure, repeat it often! Again and again! Patience is a virtue!

Lesson 3 might be a song, a silly rhyme, a poem or a tongue twister.

Or you can include one in each of the first two lessons.

These songs and rhymes, etc. could be included in the plan perhaps once or twice a fortnight. That depends on the child or adult.

Other lessons can be created using this plan. But please keep the relevant vocabulary simple and on one particular topic eg: clothes, objects in a room, weather, school, pets, family, sport. The level of difficulty can be increased over time. But never more than 15 minutes a day! This is doable.

Example of a song:

Alles Gute zum Geburtstag

Alles Gute zum Geburtstag
alles Gute nur für dich
und wir trinken auf das Leben
alle Freunde du und ich
alles Gute zum Geburtstag ja das wünsche ich dir
Liebe und Freude, Gesundheit und Glück.
Vom Schönsten im Leben ein ganz großes Stück
Blumen und Lieder vom Herzen geschenkt
solln dir beweisen das jeder an dich denkt
Heut ist dein Festtag , schau wie die Sonne lacht
das hat man im Himmel für dich heut gemacht .

Example of a rhyme:

Eins, zwei, Polizei

Eins, zwei, Polizei, drei, vier, Offizier, fünf, sechs, alte Hex' sieben, acht, gute Nacht! neun, zehn, auf Wiedersehen! (Alt. verse: neun, zehn, schlafen geh'n.)

Himpelchen und Pimpelchen

Himpelchen und Pimpelchen stiegen auf einen Berg. Himpelchen war ein Heinzelmännchen und Pimpelchen war ein Zwerg. Sie blieben lange da oben sitzen und wackelten mit den Zipfelmützen. Doch nach fünfundsechzig Wochen sind sie in den Berg gekrochen, schlafen da in guter Ruh, seid mal still und hört ihnen zu! (Schnarch, schnarch...) [sound of snoring]

Example of a fun action:

Der kleine Wurm (Hand/Finger Action)

Der kleine Wurm Karl-Theodor, der kriecht aus seinem Loch hervor. Er kriecht mal hier, er kriecht mal dort. Und plötzlich ist er wieder fort. Mit einem Mal, du spürst es auch, kriecht Theodor auf deinem Bauch, und eh' du dich versehen hast, macht er auf deiner Nase Rast. Hatschi, hatschi, hatschi!* Nun rutscht er mal vom Bauch aufs Knie, dann zu den Füßen irgendwie und dann, wie kann es anders sein, wird's ihm zu bunt und er kriecht heim.

Und:

Abzaehlreim

Ene Mene Mu und raus bist du.

Raus bist du noch lange nicht,

erste wenn du dein Alter sprichst (Alter sagen und soviel Personen abzaehlen)

Example of a game:

hot/cold game with counting to 10 (at first, then continue with other numbers) Hide an object, the child starts to look for it and then you start counting alone or together. As your voice becomes louder, the child should come closer to the hidden object, as your voice becomes softer, the child should walk further away from the hidden object. Continue until the object is found. This is a very popular basic children's game. They love it! "Warm, waermer" und "Kalt, kuehler"

Example of a tongue twister: (children love them!)

Acht alte Ameisen assen am Abend Ananas. Eight old ants ate pineapple in the evening.

Allergischer Algerier, algerischer Allergiker. Allergic Algerian, Algerian allergic.

Bäcker Braun bäckt braune Brezeln. Braune Brezeln bäckt Bäcker Braun. Baker Brown bakes brown pretzels. Brown pretzels bakes baker Brown.

Bierbrauer Bauer braut braunes Bier. Beer brewer Bauer brews brown beer.

Der dicke Dachdecker deckte das dicke Dach. Dann trug der dicke Dachdecker, die dicke Dame durch den dicken Dreck. Dann dankte die dicke Dame dem dicken Dachdecker, dass der dicke Dachdecker die dicke Dame durch den dicken Dreck trug. The fat roofer roofed the thick roof. Then the fat roofer carried the fat lady through the thick mud. Then the fat lady thanked the fat roofer for (the fat roofer) carrying the fat lady through the thick mud.

Esel essen Nesseln nicht, Nesseln essen Esel nicht. Donkeys don't eat nettles, nettles don't eat donkeys.

Es klapperten die Klapperschlangen, bis ihre Klappern schlapper klangen. The rattlesnakes rattled until their rattles sounded run-down. (This is a Schüttelreim, or "goat rhyme" - as is the following...)

Es sprach der Herr von Rubenstein, mein Hund der ist nicht stubenrein. So spoke Mr. von Rubenstein, my dog, he's not house-trained.

Es grünt so grün, wenn Spaniens Blüten blühen. It turns so green when the flowers in Spain flower. (The German version of "The rain in Spain falls mainly in the plain" from "My Fair Lady.")

Fischers Fritz ißt frische Fische, frische Fische ißt Fischers Fritz. Fischer's Fritz eats fresh fish; fresh fish eats Fischer's Fritz. (Peter Piper picked a peck of pickled peppers...)

Graben Grabengräber Gruben? Graben Grubengräber Gräben? Nein! Grabengräber graben Gräben. Grubengräber graben Gruben. Do gravediggers dig ditches? Do ditchdiggers dig graves? No! Gravediggers dig graves. Ditchdiggers dig ditches.

Eine gut gebratene Gans ist eine gute Gabe Gottes. A well-roasted goose is a good gift of God.

Hottentottenpotentatentantenattentat Hottentot potentate's aunt assassination (Note: This long humorous German word uses only seven letters of the alphabet. The correct term for 'Hottentotten' is 'Khoi-Khoi,' a now virtually extinct African tribe in what is now Namibia, formerly German South-West Africa.)

Im dichten Fichtendickicht sind dicke Fichten wichtig. In the thick spruce thicket thick spruces are important.

In Ulm, um Ulm, um Ulm herum. In Ulm, around Ulm, all around Ulm.

Example of a poem

Ein Federchen flog durch das Land Ein Federchen flog durch das Land; Ein Nilpferd schlummerte im Sand Die Feder sprach: "Ich will es wecken!" Sie liebte, andere zu necken. Auf's Nilpferd setzte sich die Feder Und streichelte sein dickes Leder. Das Nilpferd sperrte auf den Rachen Und musste ungeheuer lachen. (Joachim Ringelnatz 1883-1934, deutscher Schriftsteller und Kabarettist)

To speak German to a child whilst the child speaks only English in return is not the solution. If you keep to the lesson plan above, a child will rapidly gain confidence in speaking in simple sentences. It helps to have a supportive and patient partner as well who does not necessarily speak German. I have a student who has an Australian wife but has started to teach his two very young children things in German such as:

Putzt Dir die Zähne!

Zieh Deine Jacke an!

Komm' mit!

Beeil Dich!

Gut so!

His wife is learning a little German by osmosis and he told me his four-year old daughter really does understand the word 'gemuetlich.' This is so good to hear.

START WITH REPETITION and ROUTINE and follow the SCEPP rule:

BE SUPPORTIVE, CONSISTENT, ENCOURAGING, PERSISTENT, PATIENT!

Just a few more tips:

Read aloud to your child in German for a few minutes a day if you can, even if your child is beginning to read at school. Children love being read to. [Spielwelt has an excellent library for children.]

Note how many words in English and German are exactly the same e.g: sport, park, wind, hand, bus, warm, winter, computer and how you can often easily guess the English from the German words e.g: Musik, Glas, gut, Banane, Apfel, Adresse, Tomate, Familie, Finger, spezial, Buch, Schokolade, Australien, Klasse.

1. – check out German children’s books. Poems are simple and witty.
2. Play quick and simple games e.g: Kannst Du ein Haus fuer mich zeichnen? German food can serve as treats.
3. Make flash cards.
4. Create simple crosswords or word searches only with words they know.
5. They love ‘Simon says’ in German as a game.
6. If you feel you can put up with it, placing labels on furniture and other items around the house and identifying the German words for them is also fun. e.g: der Stuhl, der Schrank, der Tisch, das Kissen, der Kuehlscharnk, die Kochplatte, der Kessel, etc.