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## Unraveling children's aptitude for languages

By Lauran Neergaard

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WASHINGTON - The best time to learn a foreign language: Between birth and age 7.

Miss that window?

New research is showing just how children's brains can become bilingual so easily, findings that scientists hope eventually could help the rest of us learn a new language a bit easier.

"We think the magic that kids apply to this learning situation, some of the principles, can be imported into learning programs for adults," said Dr. Patricia Kuhl of the University of Washington, who is part of an international team now trying to turn those lessons into more teachable technology.

Each language uses a unique set of sounds. Scientists now know babies are born with the ability to distinguish all of them, but that ability starts weakening by the first birthday, even before they start talking.

Mastering your dominant language gets in the way of learning a second, less familiar one, Kuhl's research suggests. The brain tunes out sounds that don't fit.

"You're building a brain architecture that's a perfect fit for Japanese or English or French," whatever is native, Kuhl explained - or, if you're lucky, a brain with two sets of neural circuits dedicated to two languages.

It's remarkable that babies being raised bilingual - by simply speaking to them in two languages - can learn both in the time it takes most babies to learn one. On average, monolingual and bilingual babies start talking around age 1 and can say about 50 words by 18 months.

Italian researchers wondered why there wasn't a delay, and reported this month in the journal *Science* that being bilingual seems to make the brain more flexible.

The researchers tested 44 12-month-olds to see how they recognized three-syllable patterns. Sure enough, gaze-tracking showed the bilingual babies learned two kinds of patterns at the same time - like lo-ba-lo or lo-lo-ba - while the one-language babies learned only one, concluded Agnes Melinda Kovacs of Italy's International School for Advanced Studies.