

Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

Amy Nielson

Have you ever thought about teaching your child another language and wish that they knew it and thought that would be really cool, but you also then thought, but I don't know that language or I'm not an expert, I'm not fluent enough? My guest today is Shannon, she's an Australian mother of two and passionate traveler and she is an expert at this. Shannon talks about her own journey through not being an expert but wanting to give her kids exposure to other languages and how that led her into developing The Fast Track to Fluency Framework and her company, *Culture Kids*.

We talk about some of the why, why the first five years matter, why language exposure in general matters, how learning another language or knowing another language benefits your children both as young children, how it changes their brain and then how it helps them in school and financially later on. But we also talk about how to do it if you're a mom at home and you don't have a lot of language experience or you're not sure how to teach another language. She's going to share tips on how to do that. It's an amazing conversation, it's coming up right after this.

Welcome to the *Raising Healthy Kid Brains* podcast where moms and teachers come to learn all about kids' brains, how they work, how they learn, how they grow and simple tips and tricks for raising the most resilient, kind, smart, compassionate kids we can. All while having lots of grace and compassion for ourselves because you know what? We all really need and deserve that too. I am your host, Amy Nielson. Let's get ready to start the show.

Amy: Shannon, welcome to the show, I'm so happy to have you on today.

Shannon: Thank you so much for having me. It's nice to be able to come and just be face-to-face or ear-to-ear and actually just talk all things languages today.

Amy: I know, this is so fun. And I have to tell you, okay, I'm a little excited, first of all, you and I have worked a little bit together for a couple of years now but we

didn't get to meet until just barely. And so this is kind of fun. And also I am a little bit obsessed with languages. I am trying to learn Spanish and Korean right now so this is so fun for me. I'm so excited to get to have this conversation with you.

Shannon: Yeah, look, I'm the same. I've been obsessed with them for a very long time. And honestly the doors that opens and the conversations that it starts, I feel like everybody needs to learn a language or at least make their kids learn one just because everything that comes from it as well, so yeah, it's going to be fun this morning.

Amy: I'm so excited. Okay, tell me a little bit, how you got into this, what got you into languages and then specifically teaching children languages and coming up with your programs?

Shannon: So long story short, when I was a child, my parents gave me the opportunity to be able to learn German. And I remember it was available at school, it's not like my parents were intentional about it, it was just part of the school curriculum and they went, "Great, you can do it." And I actually took to it really quickly. And when I talk about opening doors, being able to spend a couple of years learning the language, I got the opportunity to go over to Germany on an exchange as a 15 year old.

And this is one of those experiences where I really look back on my life and see it as one of those pivotal defining moments that really it wasn't necessarily just the fact that I could communicate in a different language in a different culture on the other side of the world. It was more the fact of what it actually did in me realizing what was possible and helped me see my part in the world. So for me that was something really significant that stuck with me. But I never thought I'd ever do anything to do with languages. I just loved them.

Fast forward 10 years or so and I've got my own kids, they are one and two. We have moved to this melting pot of a city which is New York City. And so suddenly we are surrounded by language and culture. I take my kids to the playground and there'll be these beautiful Spanish speaking nannies and mamas and they'd all be speaking Spanish. And I'm like, I know this world but this is not my world.

And I love that my kids were exposed to it and that was almost their normal. And then how I really got started with actually doing it at home with my own kids was actually when we moved back to Australia.

As you can probably tell, my accent, I'm from Sydney. We moved back and I remember this process of kind of grieving what we had lost in terms of that environment, that exposure. And where we were living at the time, everybody spoke English, it was very Australian centric. And so I really wanted to be able to find something that would help keep my kids' world really big because I knew what that had done for me. And so yeah, I started researching languages and how to teach kids. And well, actually that was after I actually did some research and could not find a single thing for my kids.

So I decided that I was, if my kids were going to learn it, I was going to have to be the one responsible for creating that exposure. And yeah, the rest is history from there so it was a ride.

Amy: Oh my goodness, I love it though because it is just solving a problem that you saw a lack of something that you felt was needed and feeling that. And I think that's so beautiful, my mother was very excited about languages and tried to give us exposure. And I would remember her taking us to go visit people and she was always trying to work on her Spanish. And she was semi-fluent but she was always trying to have those conversations and she would try to expose us as children to that. And so I started being exposed to that from a very young age.

And even though I think I'd had a couple of months of Spanish in maybe junior high or something. But because of her continued efforts, by the time I got to university I tested out of, I think 12 credits of college level Spanish. And so I'm still kind of working on my fluency and that's an ongoing process for me. But I thought that was so neat but it was a lot of work. And I think that what you've created is something so different. Before we get into that though I want to talk about why we feel like it matters. How does language, learning additional languages, how does that maybe affect a child's brain?

And maybe let's talk about why it's important to start early, if you can talk about that.

Shannon: Yeah. Because this is actually a really big deal and most parents have no idea about the benefits. We think of when we teach, the idea of teaching our kids a language we think, great, so they can speak Spanish for example, or they can communicate when they travel. It was only when I started doing a little bit of research for my own kids that I realized that there was this window of opportunity where it was the best time to actually get started with our kids and all of the benefits that came with it.

And this is where it really blew my mind and almost this great idea became this conviction in my bones of going, oh my gosh, I didn't know that languages changes a child's brain. It gives them all of these academic benefits. But suddenly when you go, if I don't do something right now they're going to miss out. And I really wanted to be able to almost kind of pass that baton on to other parents because the benefits are significant. We're talking about greater mental flexibility. We're talking about greater memory.

Kids who are growing up with an additional language. They have greater problem solving skills, greater creativity. Even to then standardized testing, kids with a language score higher. So we're talking, it's not just the ability to speak but it's this rewiring of their brain, the neural pathways, their pathways they wire faster. And so it actually is giving our kids this advantage that we had no idea about. And so when I think about it from that perspective I realize that by not teaching my kids, we started with French, by not getting started with French, I was actually going to be the one robbing them of those advantages.

They could have missed out and I just knew that I had to get over a lot of my own insecurities of not being fluent, not being able to speak everything perfectly, pronunciation being awful to really give my kids the world in a sense. So that was a lot of my why around it.

Amy: Oh my goodness, I love that so much. And just thinking about it from my limited perspective and starting to learn other languages, first of all, I think, yes, I

think you're right on point with it creating more neural pathways in the brain and creating more of that problem solving creativity. It's interesting, just from some of what I've learned from myself and watching children, so I'll give one example in myself.

When I am thinking now in English, and I'm reading a book or thinking about a word, sometimes I'll think about a similar word in a different language and it gives more context and more richness to that what I'm reading about or thinking about. Because in a different language they say it differently. So when you're saying good morning in Korean, it's very different than saying good morning in English. You literally would say, "Did you sleep well", in Korean to say good morning. That's how they say it. So it brings richness that way too, which I think is really interesting.

But one of the things I thought was fascinating too, I was doing preschool for a little while, teaching preschool in my home and I had a little two year old. And both her parents were hard of hearing and so she had learned sign language just because she had to, to speak to her parents. But what's so interesting watching her was that she even at two years old could switch in and out of who she was talking to and knew when to switch to sign and when to speak verbally. And she could kind of switch in and out of language depending on what was going on.

I thought it was so fascinating to see a two year old's brain working on that level. And I'm thinking of all of those benefits that are happening with learning a second language. It's just amazing, it's kind of very cool. And I could see how that benefit would continue on and on as they grow older.

Shannon: Yeah, absolutely. Look, and on that note, it's really interesting. I remember reading a study of Patricia Kuhl from the University of Washington. And she was doing a study on a child's brain, what happens in a child's brain when they're exposed to multiple languages. Because I think oftentimes parents, especially even parents who do have a different heritage language than English, they hold back on their language because they're scared that their kids

are going to get confused. They're scared that maybe they need to focus on one language.

But what this study was actually revealing was children, newborns at this age have this unique ability to be able to differentiate between two different languages with ease. They've got this environment of exposure, they can understand the difference between Spanish and French. They can pick and choose the right way to respond. Now, obviously as a newborn you're not going to get the same response, but they could see by looking at the child's brain, the way that the brain was wiring, they could see that there was an understanding of it.

So I think you're right, even just this two year old learning to sign, there really is this natural ease that comes from being able to have that exposure from a young age. Which is why again, one of the big reasons why I'm so passionate about kids learning languages now, young is because that window of opportunity starts to close from the age of six or seven years. And so like you're saying, you've got your Spanish but you're learning Korean at the moment. How was it for you? I actually would love to know, how is it going, learning a different language as an adult, what's your experience been with that even just with regards to pronunciation?

Amy: Well, so that, yeah, absolutely has been a little bit of a challenge. I feel like Spanish because I heard, and I didn't have necessarily a native speaker in my home but my mother had lived in Mexico for a couple of months. And I mean I felt like she spoke it fairly well. But hearing those sounds I think from a young age seems to have made it easier for me to sound, and I'm sure I still have an American accent but I feel like it's closer and easier. What I read was that when you don't hear sounds because a lot of languages have different sounds, they literally have different sounds.

And so in Korean they have different vowel sounds than we have. They have some that are similar and some that are this hybrid between this vowel and this vowel. And I can't hear it, it's really hard to try to say it because it's like an in between of these other two sounds. And I think what I've read is that when

children are exposed to that from a young age they can hear it but then at a certain point it becomes harder and harder to hear the different sounds. So I can still learn it and I'm working on it and it's so fun. I've been really enjoying it, but it certainly I think is more challenging.

I would say though that learning Spanish and learning that along kind of growing up has made it easier to now start learning another language. And part of it because I understand language structure better. So I think learning Spanish helped me learn the parts of speech better like adjectives, nouns and verbs. And they're a little different in Spanish sometimes than they work in English. Well, in Korean, their grammar is completely different but I learned more of that by learning a different language. So it actually helped me learn English better I think, anyway, but yeah.

Shannon: Absolutely. I absolutely agree with you. If you think about it, you've already taught your brain to differentiate between English and Spanish. So your brain is already wiring in that way. The cognitive rewiring is already intact. So to learn additional languages from there, your brain already knows that pathway, it already knows that okay, there's different words for different things for example. So it definitely makes it significantly easier.

There's a beautiful four year old girl, she's a bit older these days but I remember seeing her, her name is Bella Devyatkina, she grew up in Russia. At four years of age she was completely fluent in seven different languages. And you think about it like that, this only came about because she had exposure to the language. Her mother was only fluent in their native Russian but she created different environments to be able to have that exposure for her. And so if you've been able to master one language, not even master it, have exposure. When you start to add in different languages it makes it so much easier.

I always think about the kids growing up in Europe. We have friends who live, they're in Germany but they're close to Italy, they're close to France. And so these kids are growing up hearing all of these different languages just in a normal environment. And so of course they naturally just pick it up because

they're around it. So yeah, I definitely think that if you can get started with one additional language, then you can add as many as you really think possible.

Amy: I think so too, yes, I had a friend from Europe as well that was fluent in several languages but could understand several more and I was a little bit jealous. I wish, I just am all surrounded mostly by English and so that's a little bit tricky but yeah, that is so neat. Let's talk a little bit about some of the opportunities maybe that come later in life because I think we've kind of covered how important it is to start early and that exposure early is so helpful. But what happens later, what other opportunities besides just the advanced cognitive ability and that extra wiring in your brain. What other opportunities maybe become available?

Shannon: Yeah. So I was chatting to a friend of mine, Dr. Gena Lester, she is a college admissions expert. And she was actually giving me some incredible insights actually in the world of college admissions. This was a non-professional conversation, we were just having a chat about her world and she was telling me, there's been this real shift in the way that the colleges are looking at a student in terms of admissions and what they're actually looking for, for preferred students in their intakes.

And what she was telling me was these days, the colleges actually prefer a minimum of three years of a foreign language exposure, so learning it for three years and looking for levels of fluency and also the ivy leagues are looking for up to four years of a foreign language. Now, what they're basically saying with this is they're actually realizing not just the academic benefits and what it actually does but they're looking for this well rounded holistically, the well-rounded child essentially.

They're looking for somebody who can handle themselves in different cultural environments, being able to connect with people who are different from them. And so she was basically saying that if you want your children to go to a really good college, you really need to prioritize languages at least definitely in high school. But in order to be able to make sure your kids are thriving in high school you actually need to start in those early first five, six years.

And so I think even from that perspective just being able to give your kids this academic edge over a lot of other kids who may not have that same language background is a really big deal, especially in a lot of these competitive places where it's really hard to get in. That is a key aspect with regards to giving your kids those opportunities in life. But I think even further down the track we're looking at even just the globalized world that we're living in. We're looking at jobs these days, jobs are going, the global companies are not just working in their own local markets, they're working with partners literally all around the world.

I mean I think it's funny just you and I, you're in the US, I'm in Australia, it's really normal that we can jump on a Zoom meeting and connect. And I think that companies these days they're really looking, not even students, they're looking for workers these days who have that language ability to be able to connect and build business around the world. And so even from that perspective, we look at opportunities within that employment space. Bilingual workers now they earn more than standard monolingual workers. They're earning between 2 to 15% more in terms of your take home pay.

And I think even in the world that we're living in, to be able to have those advantages in college, which can push you further forward in the world to have your opportunities expand with employment and different companies but also then to be able to be paid more. I think we're actually seeing that trend that languages are really setting our kids up not just as something fun to do on the weekend and play games with your kids in a different language but actually for their full future as they move forward.

So yeah, I personally think it's a really important thing. It's one of those non-negotiables now that if we really want our kids to be set up for a win for their future, we really have to lay those foundations now.

Amy: It's so interesting because we've covered this really wide array. I think of benefits everywhere from just a richness in your life and understanding your own language better and growing your brain in a new and cool way and adding to it. And then also the element of future scholastic and financial success. So

there's so many reasons to do it. So I think probably if I'm sitting here thinking myself as a parent and I'm guessing other parents that are listening or even teachers, but I don't know how that language or how do I teach it if I don't know it. What would you say about that?

Shannon: Yeah. Look, I think that's a really real fear. I remember feeling that as a mom. I remember feeling so incapable knowing that there was this world that I could give my kids but literally like I touched on it earlier talking about how I had to really get over those feelings of insecurity. I think over the years even just after working with hundreds of other parents these days in the same space, what we're really discovering is that the role of the parent is actually not to be the expert in the language.

And we think, I mean I work with a lot of home schooling families and they often feel like they've got to be the expert in these subjects to be able to teach their kids. But it's a different thing when you're talking about a language because I still feel like I'm learning English. So I'm never going to say I'm an expert in the English language, let alone adding a foreign one. And so what we're discovering these days is we're actually taking some of that pressure off parents and saying, "Your job is not to know everything, it's not to be able to speak fluently, no perfect grammar."

I said, "Your job as a mom is to actually just create the environment, particularly in those early years if you've got preschool age children right now, your job is really to lay this environment of fun and exposure in a way that actually guarantees your kids will actually fall in love with the language. And I think about it, there are so many amazing resources out there, if your kids are young. Even just adding a Spanish playlist, a music playlist when you're in the car. That's a really easy tangible way of being able to create that exposure. It's being able to read books together.

And it can be English, Spanish books for example where you can learn with your kids. I've always said to my kids, "I'm not the expert here, but hey, if I can't find the answer for you, we're going to go and find it out together." And so it becomes this world where, almost like we get to bond through language. We get

to bond through our experiences. And I even think about it, last year I took my son, he's actually a teenager these days, this is how long I've been doing this for. I took him to Europe.

I had to go over on a work trip and we went to Europe together and I actually intentionally took him to France so that we could spend some time and he could be really immersed. And he just is so curious about it all. It's just to be able to do something like that and I know not everybody's going to be able to jump on a plane and go to Mexico or France or Korea for example. But to be able to have this shared interest and to create, ask questions or cook a meal from that country, what that's actually doing is, it's actually showing your kids that there is a really big world out there and they can be a part of it.

And I think that there are so many incredible experts and creatives and people in the world who are the native speakers, who are the people who know the language. They have created so many beautiful resources that our jobs as parents is to actually lean into what they have created and bring that into your home. And by doing that you get to have fun with your kids, you get to do things with them and build their world but also build those memories and that relationship together which I think is probably one of the most beautiful things that I look back on when my kids were little is what we were able to do together.

Amy: I love that. That is so beautiful. I had the opportunity to take my kids, we found the most incredible flights to Europe for \$300, so that's what we did for Christmas one year. It was insane. And so we took our kids to Europe one year as their Christmas present and that to me was just one of the most beautiful parts about it was giving them that exposure to just different cultures. And we were in a couple of different countries but it was just amazing. But I love too that prior to that we started showing them videos, travel videos of some of these countries we were going to.

We started talking about the history of their politics, their religion, just their natural history, lots of different things. And my kids became so fascinated and now my son is really, really excited about Petra. He read a little bit about it at school and then he went into it deeper and deeper. And now he really wants to

go to Petra and so he's started planning this whole vacation for himself to Petra and looking up where it is in the world and what else is around it and what else could we do if we went there. And where would we stay and where would we fly and what would we eat and it's become this whole thing and I love it.

So I love that you're talking about that and that we can start giving that exposure and building that interest and that excitement around it because I think that is so valuable. And then they're getting some of that value already. And then tell me about, what does your program offer that you have to kind of help with some of this? If a parent's wanting to get involved and start doing some of this, what do you have that helps with that?

Shannon: I essentially wanted to create something for families to make languages accessible. And I would say this is the perfect program if you don't speak the language fluently or you don't feel confident as a mom to be able to teach it. We essentially have created a curriculum that's designed, it's very much play based. So that whole idea is to be able to teach a child in a way that they learn. So I talk about leaning on native speakers. I mean people ask me, "Oh my gosh, do you speak all of these different languages?" And I'm like, "No, but I'm the mom who knows exactly what."

I knew what I needed, level of support, native speaker exposure. I knew what I needed to be able to give my kids those opportunities. So we introduce all of our vocabulary through short five minute videos. And that essentially is so that kids can hear that native pronunciation so that they can repeat it. And then all of our activities, our lessons are all really designed around play. So we've got lots of resources that have physical games. The last thing I want is my kids to be sitting on a screen all day.

So I really want to be able to engage my kids. I want to be able to do it with my kids and to be able to really, in a sense, help them fall in love with the language. We often hear a lot of our families ask, so that their kids get really grumpy when they have to put it away. And for me that's a really positive thing because I'm like, "If our kids are having fun, they're going to want to keep doing it. And if

they're going to want to keep doing it they're going to be learning and it's all going to be absorbed."

So we have basically monthly curriculums. We have a monthly and an annual program that you can join. But essentially what it does is it gives you the opportunity to be able to teach your kids through a real structured step by step process. So we essentially take you by the hand and show you exactly what to do, where to get started, how to move forward and how to progress but also it's this flexible curriculum. So if you only have time to do something for five minutes a day, then great, we've got an option for you to be able to take our resources and work that into your family's schedule.

Or if you're a homeschooler and you want this structured 30, 45 minute lesson a week, you've got that as well. But essentially I have leaned on the most incredible creators, we've got beautiful voice-overs in our videos. We've got amazing playlists for songs and it's all thematic. So it's all focused around certain topics like actions and animals and really teaching kids the everyday vocabulary that they're going to be needing right now as opposed to just teaching kids' vocabulary words and hoping that they enjoy it.

So that's always been my heart behind is that it's something that families actually, they join and they love and they want to use them again and again for all of their kids.

Amy: I love that. And as you're talking about it, so I've been doing a lot of research on learning English better and the science, the latest science in reading and how to teach children to read and how to build vocabulary and comprehension. And it's some of those similar things, teaching those new vocabulary words in groups and in things that are kind of related to each other and that's how we can get more into our brain faster and have it stick better. So I love that that's what you're doing with your additional languages as well. That's amazing.

For our listeners who want to learn more about this and maybe check it out, how do they find you?

Shannon: Yeah. So our program is called, we are *The Culture Kid* is the business that I run. *The Culture Kid*, we are on Instagram, Facebook, all of the places that you normally find any of us. But essentially if you go to theculturekid.com, you'll be able to find everything with regards to the actual language program. We also have a free resource, it's a roadmap for parents that we've created as well. And there are a lot of families a little nervous about the idea of just diving straight into a full on curriculum.

This roadmap it's a free option for you to be able to download as well and it's a really great way to be able to see exactly what you need to be able to do. And actually shows you the roadmap essentially to getting started with the language at home. So if you head to theculturekid.com/roadmap I think it is, you should be able to grab that. I'm sure we'll pop the link in the show notes below.

Amy: We will for sure make it easy because I love links, links are amazing.

Shannon: Yes, it makes life so much easier.

Amy: It's so much better. Yes, okay, awesome. Is there anything else I should have asked you that I didn't ask you?

Shannon: No, I don't think so. Look, I just think one thing I was able to get across today is that as a parent, from one mom to another, you can actually do so much more than you thought was possible. I genuinely had no idea. There was no plans in my future that this was going to be what I was going to be doing with my life. Now I wouldn't choose to do anything else. But I think from a mom's perspective, you are your kids' first teacher as a parent. You're your child's first teacher and I know Amy talks about a lot of it.

So you have such an incredible opportunity in front of you while your children are young. And I would say just don't discount yourself. You don't have to be perfect at any of this but your child trusts you, they lean into you. And whatever you put in front of them and share with them, they trust that what you're bringing them is going to be good. So I would just say, back yourself and take a step. And

I think you're going to be surprised. When you start to hear your child's first words in Spanish coming out.

I had a lady yesterday, she sent me a video, she's been doing the program for her older children, her four and six year old, but she's like, "My two year old, my two year old, my two year old's already speaking." She's messaging me saying, "This is crazy." Because I just don't think she thought that that was possible. And so I just want to encourage you. There's so much more possible than you probably realize and just taking that first step. You're going to be pretty surprised at what's on the other side of it so yeah, that would be what I would encourage your community with.

Amy: I love it. I love encouragement, I love, yes, just lifting. And that was really good and it made me want to start again too because I think it's so empowering to children really too, I think it builds their confidence and as well as their interest and their awareness and their brains and all the things we already talked about. But I think it's something that they love and it brings them joy and a little bit of confidence in this skill that they're acquiring. And it's just kind of beautiful, so thank you for helping us feel like we can do it and that it's possible even if we are not experts ourselves.

I love that piece of this, it feels like it's built just for moms like me and I'm sure so many of our listeners, so thank you for sharing that. It's been so much fun talking to you today, thank you for coming on and chatting with me.

Shannon: Thanks, Amy, we'll chat to you really soon hopefully.

Don't you just love all the fun things we're learning on the show together? Well, we wanted to give you a chance to practice a little bit of it at home. And so we made you a special freebie just for being a listener here. And you can grab it at planningplaytime.com\special-freebie. That is planningplaytime.com\special-freebie.

So what this freebie is I'll tell you, is an amazing alphabet activity that you can start using with your kiddos. And it is based in play and is so fun. You can use dot markets with it. You can use Q-Tip painting. You could use circle cereals. There's all kinds of options, but you can print it out today and get started. Just head over to planningplaytime.com\special-freebie and we'll send that to you right away.

Thank you for hanging out with me today for this fun chat on *Raising Healthy Kid Brains*. If you want to see more of what we're doing to support kiddos and their amazing brains, come visit us on our website, planningplaytime.com. See you next week.