"Grown-ups never understand anything for themselves, and it is tiresome for children to be always and forever explaining things to them."

Antoine de Saint-Exupéry (1900 – 1944)
"The Little Prince", 1943

Young and Older Learners

It has not been confirmed by research, that children transplanted to a foreign environment learn the language easier. On the contrary, the older the child the more effectively he or she learns (Snow and Hoefnagel-Hoehle 1978). Teenagers are probably the best learners, but young children are better in learning pronunciation.
If we consider the foreign environment, the amount of time the child is exposed to the language is bigger here. Also the number of various "teachers" in the foreign surroundings is bigger. The so called "survival" motive works very well, too, bringing the feeling of the dependence of people around who are able to supply the child's needs.
In a formal classroom only one teacher to a number of children talks in front of the board. Time offered to speak is very limited and the "survival" motive doesn't work.

If you have a limited number of hours to give to foreign language learning at school, it will probably be more effective to invest these in the older classes. **The optimum age** for starting a foreign language in school seems to be 12 years of age (Snow) or 10 years of age (Urr). Puberty is a critical period in language learning. Language acquisition begins at about the same time as lateralization of our brain starts (when the child is about two years old). It is merely finished at some time between the age of five and the beginning of puberty. After this age language will not be acquired at all or at least not with full mastery of its resources (Lyons).Vocal cords cannot offer the same plasticity as before puberty as well.
Other researchers believe that there may not be any critical period or several (Singleton, 1989). It is because human life is so colourful and there might be really many things affecting language acquisition. An early start to language learning is likely to lead to better long-term results (if reinforced later), but on the other hand after puberty people might be well motivated, calmer and well concentrated.

Children have not developed their abstract thinking well yet. Also their logical thinking is on a lower level if compared with adults. Therefore adults' capacity for understanding and logical thought is greater. Adults have developed a number of **learning skills** and their individual strategies which children do not have yet. Adults cope with temporary frustrations in the hope of long-term rewards. Children need to see the results immediately. Adults are more patient and disciplined; they tend to be more cooperative thanks to their life experience and cognitive skills they have developed. Adults often have a clear purpose. They know why they should study. Studies might enable them travelling abroad, better social contacts, promotion at work.

Adults are said to have a longer **concentration** span. But even a child may spend hours absorbed in an activity that is really interesting. With an attractive toy a child seems not to get bored for days. From this point of view it looks very easy to motivate children. But you can loose **motivation** more easily with young learners. New and new interesting and attractive motives have to be brought. Monotonous, pointless activities are of no use. Older learners are more self-reliant. Motivation of adults tends to be more stable. They usually learn voluntarily with a clear aim. They are more tolerant, too, which makes the teacher's role easier in a way.

Maybe they know what B.F.Skinner (1904-1990) has expressed so appropriately: “Education is what survives when what has been learned has been forgotten.”