

# A parent's guide to... bilingualism

More children now grow up with two or more languages, but how can you help them learn? *Penny Tassoni* offers some advice

One of the wonderful changes to our society is the increasing numbers of children who have more than one language. It is estimated that one in six children in schools have two or more languages. But while there has been an increase in the number of bilingual children, it can be hard to find advice about how best to support their learning. Here are some of the things that all parents and adults working with children need to know about learning two or more languages.

## 1. Languages are codes

Learning a language requires children to break and then use a code. Children who are bilingual are, therefore, using more than one code. In order to speak fluently, children will need to learn the sounds of each language (phonology), the meanings of words and phrases (semantics) and also the grammar, including word order.

## 2. Children will learn languages in one of two ways

There are two ways in which children may develop two or more languages: 'simultaneous' or 'sequential'. 'Simultaneous' language learning occurs when children hear and use more than one language from birth or very early in childhood. 'Sequential' bilingualism happens when children have already learned one language quite well and then are introduced to a new language, probably at nursery or school.



## 3. Learning other languages does not confuse a child

It is a myth that babies and young children will mix up languages if they regularly try to speak two or more. Children will often insert a word from one language into another, but this is not done out of confusion, but out of necessity as they may not know the equivalent word or expression.

## 4. Bilingualism is good for the brain

There is now plenty of research to show that being able to use more than language code can help children's 'cognitive functions' – in other words, it makes them 'brainier'. It would seem that learning a language makes the brain learn to become more flexible and analytical. While all children are different, it would seem that being able to use more than language has plenty of benefits overall.

## 5. There are different levels of bilingualism

Children do not automatically speak each of the languages that they hear equally well. There are a lot

of factors involved, including how much time a child spends 'in' the language and also how the language is used. It is not uncommon for children to do maths only in English, if this was the language in which they are taught. Language use can also respond to changes in how languages are being used – for example, after starting school a child may reply in English rather than in their home language.

## FIVE TIPS TO HELP DEVELOP YOUR CHILD'S HOME LANGUAGE

### 1. Keeping talking!

Communicating is a habit. If you want your home language or languages to remain important in your child's life, make sure that you speak it as much as possible, so that it seems natural for your child to use it with you.

Mealtimes, bedtimes or just going for a walk can all increase your child's exposure to your home language. It is particularly important to do this, because your child is likely to spend an increasing amount of time using English as they progress through nursery, school and beyond.

To help your child communicate with you once they are in nursery or school, find out what equipment or activities your child has access to, so that you can name and talk about them in your home language.

### 2. Share books with your child each day

Books are a great way of helping your child to learn more vocabulary in your home language. Try to share at least one book a day. This is important if there are not many other speakers of your language around you. Choose books that you enjoy reading – your enthusiasm will be infectious.

Sharing books may also help your child to recognise the patterns and shapes of words in your home language.

### 3. Extend your child's language use

Once your child is talking well in your home language, look for ways of helping them to use their language to reason and solve problems. This will help your child learn to use their language for more abstract thinking. There are hundreds of ways of doing this. Try solving jigsaw puzzles together, using construction toys, or playing guessing games such as I Spy. When you are chatting together, try asking questions such as 'What makes you think that?'

### 4. Be confident

Some parents find it uncomfortable to talk directly to their child in their home language when they are out and about or if their partner does not share the language. While you must make the final decision as to how to use language, remember that the more you use your home language with your child, the better your child will be able to speak it with you. To avoid others being 'shut out', you can always paraphrase what you are saying in English, as a solution.



### 5. Be realistic

It is very easy to feel guilty about your child's language development, especially if your child is not regularly surrounded by people reinforcing your language. While some children are educated bilingually, this is not the case for most. You can, therefore, provide opportunities at home to nurture your home language, but be realistic about what is possible.

#### HOW CHILDREN LEARN LANGUAGES

##### Simultaneously

Children who learn two languages alongside each other are able to distinguish between the two codes being used. Distinguishing between the two languages is made easier when there are clear divisions between the languages. This often occurs naturally, as one parent may communicate mainly in their own language while the child hears English from other adults.

In some cases, children learn to distinguish between the two languages because they are used in different contexts – for example, only home language at home, but English elsewhere. Overall, the ideal

is that parents use the language of their own childhood and that languages are used with some consistency.

##### Sequentially

Where children are already able to communicate in one language and then are exposed to another, they tend to go through four stages. Some children can be very disorientated at first and so settling in gradually is important. How quickly children learn the new language depends on how much sensitive adult support is available.

The four stages that children will go through when learning sequentially include the following:

- At first, they carry on trying to use their usual language.
- Next comes a silent or non-verbal period, when they become quiet as they absorb the sounds and patterns of the new language.
- In the next stage, children start to use and join in phrases that they hear frequently – for example, 'snacktime'.
- Finally, they start to use the new language in more complex ways – both in the words and sentences they produce. ➤

### TYPICAL QUESTIONS

**Q. Should I start off speaking English to my baby and then introduce my own language later on?**

**A.** It is always best to start off in your own language for a variety of reasons. Firstly, your own language will be fluent and feel more natural for you to use. It will also help your child because the grammar and sounds that you use will be accurate and so your child is likely to break into the code of the language more quickly. From this position of strength, learning English as an additional language will be an easier task.

You should be aware that it can also be hard to introduce your home language later, as your child will have developed a habit of talking with you in English. Changing language habits can be hard.

**Q. Before starting at nursery full time, my child spoke Polish. While my child has learned English quickly, he is now using it at home.**

**A.** This is common when children's exposure to home language has decreased and they have developed fluency in English. Don't worry, but do keep using your home language with him.

You could try not responding immediately to his English to see if he reverts to your home language. If this does not work, look out for some books, rhymes and songs that he can join in with. The key is to stay patient and be encouraging.

It may be that you will need to look for ways of immersing him back into Polish, which could include music, cartoons and songs – all things that you can enjoy together.



**Q. My child's nursery offers French classes for one hour a week. Is there any point in my child taking part given that we do not speak French at home?**

**A.** Many parents like the idea of their children learning more than one language, so such classes are popular. I think the key is to be realistic about just how much language a young child can pick up in this time.

Having said this, it can give children an interest in languages and also introduce them to the sounds and patterns of the language.

**Q. My child's school sends home reading books that are in English. I am meant to hear my child read them. What should I do?**

**A.** This is a tricky question with no perfect answer. I would suggest that you look at the book and the pictures using your home language to start with. When you have explored the book, encourage your child to read it in English. Comments, advice and encouragement can still be done in your home language.

### SPEAKING LANGUAGES EQUALLY WELL

Children pick up words and expressions according to the language being used at the time. This can result in children having gaps in their vocabulary. They may, for example, pick up the phrase 'sand tray' in English while in nursery, but may not know the equivalent word in their home language.

Although it is difficult to ensure that a child speaks each of their languages equally well, here are some ideas that you could try to help them.

### Using photographs

Your child's nursery is likely to take photographs of your child. They may also put them into a record called a 'learning journey'. By sharing these photographs with your child and talking about them in your home language, your child will learn the words associated with the activities and resources that appear in the photographs.

### Repeating games and activities

It is worth talking to your child's nursery about activities and games that it has planned for your child. If your child enjoyed these activities when taking part in the nursery, consider repeating them at home. This way, your child can learn the words in your home language linked to what they have been taught.

### Books

Some of the books that your child has enjoyed in English may be available in your home language. If it is possible for you to share these books with your child at home, your child will be gaining equivalent phrases and words. ■