

The benefits of **MULTILINGUALISM** IN THE FAMILY



**ADVICE FOR
PARENTS**

In the UK, schoolchildren have been found to speak more than 300 different languages. While learning English is important for multilingual children to integrate into the community, it is also crucial to understand that growing up with more than one language is a great opportunity for them.

Speaking two languages can help a child:

- Develop stronger social skills
- Be a better language learner
- Have better reading skills, attention and creative thinking
- Understand their own cultural heritage and communicate with the extended family

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

Do children get confused when they hear two different languages spoken around them?

Studies show that bilingual infants can distinguish between two different languages on the basis of what they sound like, both when the languages are different (like English and Tagalog) and when they are very similar (like Spanish and Catalan). Bilingual toddlers soon learn who speaks what language around them and whether they are bilingual speakers like them or not.

Do bilingual children confuse their languages?

Children may switch back and forth from one language to another, but this doesn't mean they are confused about what language they are using. They may switch because a specific word is difficult to translate, but also because a concept or a joke may be better expressed in one of the two languages.

When and how should we start speaking both languages to our child?

The best way to introduce your child to your home language is to speak it naturally and to start from birth.

Children need to hear and use a language regularly in order to learn it, and the earlier they start, the more chances they will have of developing good pronunciation and grammar skills.

What about introducing a second language when children are older?

Research shows that older children can be as good as younger children at learning a new language, especially if they already know how to read and write. Even in the case of second language learning a child's success will depend, among other things, on the consistency and regularity of meaningful opportunities to hear and use the language.

Should we switch to English when our child starts school?

It is very important that you continue to use your home language. Developing reading and writing skills in one language – any language – actually helps improve the same skills in the other. Especially if your level of English is not native, you may end up doing more harm than good by switching to English. Instead, you should keep providing high-quality



input in your language, by reading together, having meaningful conversations and, if possible, interacting with a larger community of speakers, both adults and children.

My child often refuses to answer me in our home language. Should I just give up?

Don't give up! Many children develop a passive knowledge of a second language, which means that they understand it, but for different reasons, they don't feel comfortable speaking it. It's important that you keep interacting with your child in your home language. Avoid punishing or reprimanding children for answering in English, instead, try to create situations where they would be motivated to speak in your language. For example, meeting and playing with others who speak the same language as them will help children to overcome their anxieties.

Maintaining the home language: TIPS FROM PARENTS TO PARENTS

- 1 Watch TV shows and films in the home language. Afterwards, initiate a conversation about the plot, the characters, etc. This can be a great activity for older children as well!
- 2 Allocate a time for the home language every day. This can be done during a car trip or at the dinner table. Make sure the topic is interesting so that children take an active part in the conversation!
- 3 Explain to your children what it means to live in a bilingual family environment. For example, say that you feel more comfortable speaking in the home language and expect to be addressed in it. Talk about all the advantages that come from learning two languages as children, like communicating with people in other countries and having a much easier time than people learning a second language later in life.
- 4 Go digital. Have all the electronic devices set to the home language; with older children, text and email only in the home language.
- 5 Books and music. Singing in the home language is a fun activity for younger children and rhymes make it easy to remember words. Reading aloud in the home language is also beneficial and can be done with older children to build on vocabulary and grammar.
- 6 Provide opportunities to speak the language with friends. This can be done for example by attending a Saturday school or a playgroup, but also using Skype, Facetime or WhatsApp to communicate with family back home.



HOW CAN WE HELP?

- Browse our website for events, useful information and answers to the most common questions about bringing up bilingual children
- Invite us to give a talk at your children's school or nursery

GET INVOLVED!

You have the chance to participate in cutting-edge research on multilingualism carried out at the University of Reading. If you would like your child to be in our list of participants, send us an email specifying your child's age and languages spoken. With your consent we will include you in our database and you may be contacted to take part in one of our projects.

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