



CHILDHOOD BILINGUALISM AND MULTILINGUALISM

A Short Guide for Families



THIS HANDOUT IS FOR PARENTS AND FAMILIES WHO WANT TO LEARN:

The effects of learning more
than one language at a time
How to best help children learn
an additional language

COMMON QUESTIONS

What are the advantages of speaking more than one language?

Children who are exposed to more than one language early in life:

- Are able to understand and talk with more people
- Can talk with relatives who may speak a different language
- Are more sensitive to people from other cultures
- Have more job opportunities as adults
- Have stronger thinking skills, such as better memory, phonological awareness, attention, reasoning and problem-solving

What are some ways in which my child can learn more than one language at a time?

There is more than one way for a child to learn a second or third language. Some ways are :

- One language at home and another at daycare
- Two at home
- Two at home and a third at school
- Two at the same time
- One after the other
- A second language learned later in life

Will using more than one language when my child is young confuse him/her? Will he/she not be able to master each language?

Using many languages around children will not confuse them or make it harder for them to master each language.

While it is true that children may mix the two languages that they use in daily life and say something like “Where is my chapeau?”, this is not because they are confused. Often, it is a way for them to express themselves when they do not know the word in the second language. They are just using the words that they know to get their message across. Adults do this too and in fact children are often just copying what they hear around them.

Should I only speak one language and my partner another? How should we manage? If my child is going to French school, should we only speak French?

What is key is to expose your child to a rich mix of ways people use language.

Do:

- Read, speak and sing to your child in the language(s) in which you are most comfortable. Your partner, family members and the daycare should also speak in the language they prefer. This is a great way for children to learn and get used to many new words and ideas
- Expose your child to each language on a regular basis. Children need to hear and observe a language for 30 to 40 percent of each day (while they are awake) to be able to use it to communicate. This has to be done for long stretches of time (years). If children only hear a language once in a while, it will be hard for them to master it
- Promote activities children can do in the second or third language to increase the amount of time they are exposed to it, like: ▶

Do (cont'd):

- Listening to audiobooks on CD or audio e-books
- Watching a movie
- Daycare, school, or classes
- Community activities like library story time, clubs, and sports

Don't:

- Be afraid to mix two languages when speaking to your child
- Use a language in which you are not fluent. This will just limit how you express yourself and will not help a child learn that language any faster or better

What if my child has speech or language difficulties? Is it a good idea to expose them to another language?

Learning a second language is a good idea, even if your child has speech or language difficulties.

This is true for all children, even children with a language disorder, autism, or an intellectual disability. They will learn the second language just like they learned the first language. Learning another language will not cause or make language difficulties worse.

Did You Know...

- Around the world, it is very common for children to learn two or three languages at once
- Children who are fluent in their home language do better in school in their second language
- It is never too early or too late to learn a language

- Worldwide, there are more people who speak two or more languages than people who speak one
- Speaking more than one language may even slow the start of symptoms of dementia later in life

Further Reading and References

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