

Raising Bilingual (or Multi-Lingual) Children

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How do you do it?

Some options:

One Person, One Language: each parent or caregiver consistently speaks only one language to the child. For example, mother speaks only Mandarin to the child, father speaks only English. Or Grandma speaks only Russian while other family members use English with the child.

Family Language at Home: family members all speak primarily their family language at home. The child will learn the community language (e.g. English) later, as they go out into the community, attending pre-school, kindergarten and onward.

Mixed: Family speaks both family language and community language at home, interchangeably.

Exposure to Other Languages: Some families who primarily speak one language both at home and in the community (e.g. English) may dabble in other languages. Perhaps teaching the child how to count or name animals. Or they may read books, watch videos, or sing songs in another language, or use it in occasional conversation. They may seek out language-based playgroups, choose an au pair or nanny who speaks a different language or choose a child care where another language is spoken.

Does it work?

The key components that affect whether a child learns a language are exposure and need. Are they exposed to the language in multiple ways by multiple speakers? The greater the exposure to a language, the greater their chance of learning it. Do they need to use the language to interact with people they care about and to get what they want? This will increase the chance they will learn it.

So, if you're just offering occasional exposure to other languages, where they don't need to use the language in return (for example, reading books or watching videos) they will likely have only a basic familiarity with the sounds of the language and the ability to say a few words.

If a child is exposed to several hours of engaged interaction each week, where they are motivated to communicate with the speaker, like at child care or via one-on-one care by a nanny or an extended family member, they may learn to carry on basic conversations.

If a child is immersed in a language for more than 30% of their waking hours, they are likely to become completely fluent in that language. Interacting with more than one person in that language will build their skills, so many parents seek out language-based playgroups, story times, and other activities so the child can interact with other adults and with other children in that language.

Some children observe closely to figure out what's the "important language" and focus on that. For example, if they notice that Grandma speaks Spanish to them most of the time, but speaks to other people in English, they realize they can speak English with her and get the interaction they want, so they may not choose to *speak* Spanish (though they may *understand* it well.)

Start early, or delay?

Parents worry that learning two languages at once (simultaneous bilingualism) will be confusing. They wonder if it's better to wait till a child knows one language well before starting the next (sequential bilingualism). Most experts say it's fine to start from birth – the child has two “native languages.”

Although we can learn a new language at any age, young children are especially primed for it. At 6 months, babies are able to differentiate between any sounds that human beings make. But as they age, they begin to “prune” some synapses (connections) they've built in their brains. Connections that are important get reinforced, but things they aren't using in everyday life get cut. So, by 11 months, a mono-lingual baby no longer hears differences that aren't important in his family's language. For example, a Japanese child can no longer hear the difference between ra and la, because it's irrelevant in Japanese. For a bilingual child, at 14 months, they recognize all the sounds that are important to *both* their languages, but don't distinguish sounds that don't matter in either language. So, exposure to both languages from birth to age 2 primes their brain for lifelong skills in that language.

Are there disadvantages to learning early on?

If only the family language is spoken at home, and the child has minimal exposure to the community language before starting school, it's not unusual for them to struggle a little in the first few months of pre-school or school, but usually within 6 – 9 months or so, they catch up to the native speakers.

If the family speaks multiple languages, the child will of course sometimes make mistakes, like asking “Where you are?” instead of “where are you?” or calling something by the wrong name. This is not much different than the mistakes a mono-lingual child makes, like calling a cow a sheep, or saying “I have one books.” Children outgrow this. Bilingual children may also mix multiple languages into one sentence, especially when they know that the person they're speaking to knows both languages. When they're speaking to a mono-lingual person, they're more likely to stay in one language.

Bilingual children may *seem* to know fewer words, and be slower in language development (perhaps 3 – 6 months behind peers in either language in the toddler and preschool years). However, if you add together the words they know in both languages, the total is almost always higher than it is for those who speak one language. And long-term, they tend to be more skilled at language learning.

If you're worried, here are red flags to watch out for: for 10 – 15 month olds - less than one new word per week (in either language); by 20 months – know less than 20 words (in two languages combined); by 2 – 3 years, no word combinations in either language (like 'red ball' or 'give cookie').

Are there benefits to learning two languages early on?

Early childhood is the easiest time to learn multiple languages. Speaking the language of their heritage can help connect them to that history, and to their extended family. Knowing multiple languages can help your child in school and in their future career in our increasingly global society.

Multi-lingual children have been shown to be better at problem-solving – they are more flexible thinkers. They are also better at filtering out distractions and concentrating on the task at hand. Knowing multiple languages may help them feel at ease in different environments. Being aware of the need to adjust their language depending on whom they're speaking to may increase empathy overall.

Resources: <https://www.psychologytoday.com/intl/blog/language-and-mind/201903/how-to-raise-a-bilingual-child-seven-strategies-for-success>; <https://raisingchildren.net.au/babies/connecting-communicating/bilingualism-multilingualism/raising-bilingual-children-tips>