

RAISING A BILINGUAL CHILD

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Helping Your Child Learn a Second Language

There was a time when educators believed that a second language should be introduced in secondary school. Learning a second, or third, language was considered a thing for grown-ups to do. That time is long gone! Global communication requires us to be educated in more than one language and linguistic studies show that the ideal time to learn a language is as early as possible, from birth.

So what do I do, as a parent, to help my child on the path to bilingualism - to enable him to become equally comfortable and effective with two languages?

Can Your Child Be Effectively Bilingual?

Most recent research in the United States suggests children can become equally effective in a second language. Further, balanced bilinguals who are equally strong in two languages tend to do better in I.Q. tests. They are thought to benefit from having their thinking stretched, and awareness expanded, early.

Children should begin learning a second language as early as possible. So says Colin Baker, professor of bilingual education at the University of Wales and author of *An Encyclopaedia of Bilingualism and Bilingual Education*. We learn language best before the age of six so parents should take advantage of these key language learning years, from 0-6 years old. From birth a child's senses are absorbing the sounds around him. His brain is storing the complex patterns that make up language and his windows of language are open wide to absorb it most easily. After the age of six our ability to learn language decreases as we get older, as anyone who has struggled to learn a language as an adult will attest to!

Prof Baker believes that a child will not be confused by two languages as long as the two are separated initially, suggesting that parents and teachers use only one language at a time. Recent research at Antwerp University shows that two and three year-olds are able to understand that they are using two distinct languages. At Julia Gabriel Centre for Learning we recommend, where parents are of different language groups, that each uses only their own language with their child.

It is not unusual for children to become fluent in a language other than their parents' through using it at kindergarten or with friends. We have seen this happen at our pre-school, Chiltern House. Because they want to fit in, children are highly motivated to learn and are much less likely than adults to forget vocabulary and constructions learned outside the home.

Environment is Key

What are the ideal conditions in which to learn a language? First of all we need **motivation** to learn. The best motivation is the need to communicate in a language, for example the desire to make needs known at home or to fit in at school. Then we need **interest**. An interested child will learn sub-consciously, without realising that he's learning. Children learn to speak and read characters through enjoyable activities and games that capture interest as long as the content and form hold attention. Young children have short attention spans: An average of five minutes for two to three year-olds, extending to ten minutes for three to four year-olds.

Activities must be varied and scheduling flexible in order to capture and hold attention — without pressure.

When children are excited and happy they learn most easily. So it follows **that a relaxed, fun-filled environment** is key. The final ingredient and the most important link in the process of learning a language is the person who models that language: The parent, the teacher, the guide. The more creative the model, the more the child will become imaginatively involved and learn subconsciously, through play. In other words keep all talking, and exposure to a second language, fun.

For language learning to be successful it is essential that all exposure provides positive experience. There is no room for destructive criticism or negative comments. What the child needs is praise for effort, celebration of success, joy and laughter. Don't worry if he makes mistakes in grammar or pronunciation. Try to avoid correcting negatively. Just repeat the sentence back to him accurately, model it for him. In time he will automatically use the right structure which the language-learning area of his brain will have stored away for future use. For example:

Child: "Want go now park."

Adult Solution A: "That's not the right way to ask. If you want to go to the park learn to ask properly. Say it like this.....No, like this....."

Result A: Child feels wrong, gets bored repeating words, loses interest in going to the park, loses confidence in his ability to make his needs known. A learning opportunity is lost.

Adult Solution B: "You want to go to the Park now? I want to go to the Park now, too. We'll go when we're ready."

Result B: Child hears his sentence modelled correctly and stores it away. His needs are acknowledged, he feels good about the communication. Further language learning opportunities will take place in the park.

The Foundation of Language is Musical

A baby absorbs the sounds of the language around him long before he is able to speak. Because he is highly sensitive to sound and aware of language patterns he learns the rhythm and the tune of a language before is able to learn the words and the structure. The beat and the melody form the foundation levels of language acquisition.

As parents and teachers we can build on this awareness by sharing and enjoying songs and rhymes with our children. Sing nursery rhymes, read verse, clap to the rhythm and let the tune help your child to learn a first or a second language.

Children need time, understanding and support from their parents as they learn. We must recognise and reward effort as well as achievement so that the motivation to learn predicts success. If the learning process itself is a joy, it will lead to a lifetime of enjoyable communication.

Tips for Parents

Do keep all feedback relaxed and positive.

Do stick, as far as possible, to one person one code.

Do provide a good talking model yourself.

Do repeat what your child says so that he hears it “modelled” back to him.

Do provide daily exposure to both languages .

Do set all language in a meaningful context. Talk about what your child can see or is doing .

Do encourage and praise all efforts.

Do spend time playing with your child and talk about what you are doing together while you are doing it.

Do read books and stories to your child as early as possible. He will absorb language long before he is able to speak.

Do read your child stories in a first and second language but stick to one language within one book.

Don't make your child repeat words or copy you: A meaningless exercise, sure to kill interest.

Don't correct your child's pronunciation: Just repeat the words back to him in the correct way.

Don't teach words out of context.

Don't mix languages within the same sentence. Repeat the whole sentence in the other language.