



Speech and Language Therapy Advice Sheet

Help Growing Up with More than One Language

Being bilingual means being able to speak and understand more than one language. Many children are exposed to more than one language and acquire them without difficulty.

How well your child develops either language depends how often and how long they hear the language for and how clearly it is communicated i.e. one language at a time vs. language mixing.

Your child may at first be a little slow at learning words, or they may confuse the two languages. Often they catch up quickly.

If your child hears both languages enough and communicated separately, especially if they are having difficulty, this will improve their development.

Young children are usually better than adults at learning new sounds and they enjoy copying and playing with sounds and are not embarrassed about 'getting it wrong'.

- The best way to help your child is to make it obvious to them that they are hearing two languages, and by helping them to distinguish between them.
- For young children, either encourage different family members each to predominantly speak one language to the child e.g. the child hears their mother mainly using Portuguese and their Dad and older sister using English.
- Alternatively, separate the languages by keeping them to different environments e.g. the child hears English at playgroup, friend's houses and the shops, and Polish at home and family gatherings.
- For older children, name the languages and talk about them.
- Teach your child nursery rhymes and songs in your own language.
- Tell your child stories in your language. Encourage your child to join in with the story telling.
- Talk to your children about what they did at playgroup, nursery or school in your language. If they use English words repeat what they have said using your language.
- Don't be frightened to use your language in public.
- Try to make sure your children have the chance to mix with some children who speak the same home language.
- Try to find books written in your language for your child. If there aren't any try to make your own or ask someone else to help you.
- Don't laugh or tease your child because of her accent or if she makes mistakes.
- Help your child by exposing them to language in a quiet environment. Switch off the TV and music.
- Make sure you have one to one time with your child.
- Get your child's attention by calling his name or tapping him before you talk to him to make sure he is taking the language in.
- Talk at a level they can understand; keep sentences short and simple.
- Don't be self conscious about repeating names and vocabulary lots; it is the way that children learn best.

Frequently Asked Questions

Is it normal for my child to answer me in English when I speak to her in my language?

Many children do this particularly if they know that their parents understand English very well. These children will be able to speak the home language again very quickly if they need to, providing the parents continue to use the home language with them.

My child came to Canada six months ago and couldn't speak English. He has been at school since then. He doesn't speak at all at school. Should I start speaking English to him?

Many children refuse to speak the new language for a period of time. There are many reasons for this. Check with the class teacher how your child is settling into school and if they feel that your child just needs to build confidence to use English or whether there are any other concerns. If you stop speaking your language to him he will feel cut off from everything he has known previously and this might make the situation worse. He needs lots of praise and interaction in his own language.

I'm not teaching my children my language because it is not a proper language. It isn't even written down and educated people don't speak it.

Being bilingual in any language can have very positive effects on children and their education. It is also important for reasons of identity particularly when children become teenagers. The fact that a language is not written down does not mean it is not a language. English has not always been a written language.

I'm not teaching my child our family's language. I want him to learn English first then he can learn our language.

Many parents say this. It is important to remember that the younger a child is the easier it is to learn a language. Also many children feel left out in their families when everyone around them is speaking a language they cannot understand. Children in this situation also miss out on all the advantages of bilingualism.

My children tell me not to speak my language to them in the school playground or in public.

Children who are not encouraged from very young to feel very proud of their language and culture can feel like this. Also children who are teased at school may feel embarrassed. The school should be encouraged to see bilingualism as an extra skill which the child has. He should be praised publicly for using it. Some children respond very well to being told of the advantages of being bilingual. Attending classes at a community language school can also help children to feel much more positive about their bilingualism.

I speak Cantonese to my four year old daughter. My husband speaks English to her. When she speaks Cantonese she uses some English words as well as Cantonese. She does the same when she speaks English. Is she confused?

Children will use words that they know rather than not say anything at all. For instance if a child knows the word for 'ice cream' in one language and not the other she will use the word in the language she knows rather than not ask for ice cream at all. The child is not confused; she is simply making use of all the language she has.

During the holidays we had been to see one of Henry VIII's castles. When my son told me that they were doing work on Henry VIII at school I suggested he should take in the photos from the castle. My son looked very confused. He only realised that he had learned about this king before when I explained that Henry VIII was the same person as "Henry huit". Is this normal?

Children often don't see the relationship between things which they have experienced in different languages. That is why children benefit from doing their homework and talking about their school work in English and their home language.