

# USING HOME LANGUAGES TO SUPPORT LEARNING AT HOME

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# Introduction

- Researcher
- Parent
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# Main focus

- How parents can help their children with learning at home
- How home languages can be employed when engaging with work sent from schools in English and other subject areas

# Before we start

- Advantages of bilingualism
  - makes people more tolerant because it helps them acquire two very important skills – cultural competence (a better understanding of various ways that people behave and communicate), and tolerance of ambiguity (how people approach new situations).
  - children feel connected to the world, but at the same time stay connected to their family, so they feel secure in their identity and have more self-confidence. This helps them do well at school.
  - helps children's learning because they can think about their ideas in both languages. They can learn other languages more easily and have more job opportunities in the future.

# Learning languages

- Children in the earliest years are uniquely programmed to any language(s) in their environment. Linguists refer to the way in which small children learn languages as the *assimilative phase* of language learning.
- The young child is capable of instinctively absorbing not only the phonemes, vocabulary, and melody of a language, but also its grammatical structures, and within a few years can express themselves freely.
- Language learning in the very earliest years is a by-product of *emotional attachment*. The small child responds to the language(s) of those who care for them - mother, father, siblings, grandparents, teachers. At this age, a child naturally accepts two or more languages in their environment if they are used in a consistent way. It is *not confusing* to them to hear different languages from different people.

# Older children

- Children can accept that a different situation may require a different language or that the world outside the home may require a different one from that used within. As the child grows older, the languages of school and playmates take on increasing importance.
- Sometime between the ages of 9 and 12, the ability to assimilate a language naturally is lost and language-learning passes to an *analytic phase* - the process by which all of us who acquired languages learned as teenagers or adults.

# Will a child be confused by learning with two or more languages?

- A child's little brain has more than enough horsepower to cope with two languages or more without affecting the dominant language or impeding learning.
- This has been well proven by decades of research and countless families around the world, including the many bilingual counties where multilingualism is the norm, not the exception -- such as Canada, Belgium, Switzerland, and Finland, just to name a few.

# Does one have to learn one language properly first and then be taught other languages later?

- This is not only wrong, but totally counterproductive. Studies have concluded that learning languages simultaneously is magnitudes easier.
- After having already learned one language, it takes effort, more interaction, and motivation to learn a second language.



# Is it true that all bilingual children start to speak later than monolingual children?

- There is no evidence that bilingual children learn to speak later. Some children, whether bilingual or monolingual, learn to speak later than others.

# What about children who have speech problems and/or are seeing a speech therapist?

- There is no evidence that bilingualism will make it harder for children with speech problems to develop speech.
- If the family stops speaking their language to a child who already has a speech problem there is a possibility that the child will become even more isolated and unable to speak.
- If communication in the family is difficult in English, this can only add to the problems. A child with a speech problem needs to be surrounded by people who feel confident in their use of language so that he has positive role models.
- Some researchers in this field even think that bilingualism can be very positive for these children.

# Should the parents stop speaking their home language and speak only English (even if their English is not very good)?

- Children need positive and confident role models around them and parents are the ones children are looking up to. If communication in the family is difficult in English, this can only impede language learning and learning in general.
- Children need to be surrounded by people who feel confident in their use of language to build strong relationships with their family and feel comfortable at home.
- A safe and stable home environment facilitates learning.

# Learning and languages

- Children need to develop strong foundations in the language that is dominant in the home, where most children spend most of their time.
- Home language skills are transferable to new languages and strengthen children's understanding of language use.
- Children who have had the benefit of a rich, engaging language and literacy environment in their early years in their home language are much more likely to transfer their language and literacy skills to their new language successfully.
- Children also progress best if the home language continues to be maintained and developed while English is introduced.

# How children learn

- The most important thing young children need to learn, and progress is a *rich, engaging, interesting, stimulating environment*. Recent research has made it clear that this is the foundation that makes literacy and school success possible.
- What is even more interesting is that researchers are also finding that young children need this to happen in any or all languages they are learning. If a child is growing up simultaneously with two or more languages, that child needs to hear stories, songs and conversations in *each* of those languages. And, if a child started learning in one language and later begins an additional language – it is absolutely critical that they continue to receive enriching language input in their original language while learning the second.
- Insistence on an English-only approach in the home is likely to result in a fragmented development where the child is denied the opportunity to develop proficiency in either language and struggles with learning in general. Research shows that continuing to use home languages alongside their new language acquisition will make the process of learning English faster and easier.

# How does bilingualism affect the way children develop literacy skills?

- Children who are familiar with books and stories in first languages find it easier to learn to read and write in English when they get to school.
- Bilingual children who are exposed to two different written languages or even two different writing systems can read and write English at high levels. They might also have a better understanding of the relationship between how words look and sound than their peers who speak English only.
- What is learned in one language is easily transferred into another. Children learning to read and write in a home language are not just developing home language skills. Reading and writing strategies learned in one language transfer to the other, for example:
  - understanding that texts convey meaning;
  - understanding how scripts are used to construct and convey their own meanings;
  - use of context, syntactic and semantic cues;
  - skills such as skimming, scanning and drawing inferences;
  - metalinguistic awareness.

# Should parents speak their home language when supporting their children learning at home?

- Yes. If children know their home language well, it will help them learn and develop their English further.
- We know that children encode most of the concepts they learn via language. When they understand an idea in any language, they easily pick up the English word that means the same thing. They also know how to use grammar and vocabulary in their home language, so they can quickly work out what is similar or different about the English language.
- If they know how read in their home language, they can apply the same principle to English and this will speed up their learning.
- However, if they go to school and receive no continuing support for their home language, they may lose their ability to use the information that was learned at home. So, parents have to work together with teachers when children are back at school.

# **Some parents say they are not using their family's language with a child, because they want them to learn English and other things better**

- Many parents say this. It is important to understand that child's wellbeing is primary here, especially in the current situation. Many children may feel left out in their families when everyone around them is speaking a language they cannot understand.
- It is very important that parents use the language they know best and feel most comfortable in. This is how they can help children develop language, talk about ideas and learn about the world.
- A child benefits from learning from their parents if the parents are confident in that language.



# Family situation

- Since children's bilingualism is not so much a function of the child's abilities as of the particular family and language situation, it is useful for parents to ask themselves several questions in considering how to use home languages:
- What languages were used and how before?
- What is, at present, the most spontaneous and natural language between the parents and children?
- What language does make a child feel comfortable and at ease?
- This is not a time to introduce any new and rapid changes!

# Families

- Family situations differ subtly from one another, but they can be categorised into some broad groups in terms of the languages spoken within the family.
  - **Both parents speak their home language to the child.**
  - **One parent speaks English, one parent speaks home language to the child** (the "one-person, one-language" (OPOL) method).
  - **Both parents speak English to the child, but speak home language between themselves.**
- and many variations of these categories

# **ADVICE TO PARENTS**

# Make it fun

- There is no getting around the fact that learning at home is a lot of hard work for everyone involved, so it is vital to make the experience enjoyable to whatever degree you can.
- It is an odd balance, but it is important to be both very serious and very playful at the same time: serious about the process and yet playful when it comes to carrying that process out.
- Half of this is simply attitude, but the other half involves various activities. And they can be done in any language.

# Talk, talk, talk to your child

- Research has shown a correlation between the volume of speech spoken by parents to their children, especially from birth to age 3, and the child's language and overall cognitive ability at a later age.
- In other words, the sheer quantity of speech directed at the child by the parents and caregivers has a tremendous impact. (Of course, the quality of that speech is important, too!)
- **Make an effort to increase the sheer volume of speech you direct toward your children.**
- Conversation has so many cognitive and social/emotional benefits. It turns out that interesting conversations form some of the best foundations for learning.
- Don't settle for simple sentences and one-word answers. Get your child talking about what they are doing or what they are about to do or what they see or where they are going. A real conversation needs the participants to take turns going back and forth at least five times, and captures the interests of both participants.

# Engage in storytelling

- Tell your children true stories from your childhood—kids love to hear about the (mis)adventures of their parents when they were young.
- You can also invent fantastical “made-up memories” from your past or your children’s early years. (Kids like telling “made-up memories,” too.)
- The point is, storytelling—whether fact or fiction—can help expand and enrich the conversations you have with your children, and are especially suited for mealtimes. Make images (photos, illustrations, etc.) a staple of your efforts.

# Read aloud every day

- Read aloud to your child in your home language, for at least 15 minutes each day.
- It is a vital practice when it comes to nurturing not only good bilingual ability, but also learning.
- It may seem too simple, but reading aloud regularly has an enormous impact on a child's language development as well as his interest in books and literacy.
- If you don't read aloud—preferably from day one and continuing for as long as you possibly can - you are not taking advantage of the number one way to boost their language ability and learning . **Books and reading have tremendous power!**

# Homework in English

- In preschool (and school) children will learn the English sounds first and it would help them if they learn this first as they would need to follow the curriculum. You would therefore help them with their early English homework (learning the sounds and doing some reading) probably talking English to them during some time.
- It would be a situational switch to English that many families with bilingual children do during homework tasks in another language.
- Homework in English subjects can be done in English with some explanations in home language. You can draw some parallels between the languages and compare or contrast different grammatical rules or words. You can use this as an opportunity to help your child not only with English, but also with home language. Most other subjects can be done fully in home language.



# Other learning at home

- However, don't feel you can't or shouldn't help with homework or any other school assignments that are in the English language using home language.
- For example, you can read the homework text in English but give the instructions in your home language. So, all of the conversations around that homework remain then in your home language. You can give explanations, clarify questions, discuss text and its meaning.
- It may take some focus and practice on your part, but once you get used to it, it should become easier and you will do it without much effort. Code switching, or alternating between two languages even in one sentence, is a normal part of communication in bilingual families and people, and it will not create confusion in your children.

# Mixing and code-switching

- You can use a mix.
- You can explain the homework in home language, but use English phonics for spelling and repeat sums and subtractions in home language and English.
- Or children can ask the question in English and you answer in home language. Of course, there are times when you will have to use English to answer them, but try going back to home language as quickly as possible. When you comment, for example, about their writing, you can still use home language for the comment, but would say the sentence in English, if needed.
- Sometimes you can talk about the subject entirely in home language and then write about it in English in the workbook or homework folder.
- If the task is to read a text aloud and then answer comprehension questions, your children read in English and then retell the story or answer your questions in home language. It will help reinforcing understanding of written text.

# One parent one language

- If your children are bilingual and your partner's language is English and you use OPOL approach, you could split the homework or do it in stages.
- For example, Math homework could be done mostly in English (Dad's responsibility) working on new concept. Once your child masters it in English you can gradually introduce home language vocabulary. Then you can use home language more, but sometimes you will inevitable switch to English, but it is absolutely fine to mix and translate.

# Reading books from school

- When your child brings home a book you are supposed to read to them in English, you can talk about this book in home language.
- Usually children start with picture books with short texts and children can easily tell the story with their own words, then you would read the story to them and afterwards you could talk about the plot in home language.
- By doing so, you would offer them the opportunity to consolidate their passive vocabulary in home language and you support their English too by reading the story in English.
- If your child wants to talk about the plot in English, they can do so, but you can ask questions in home language and maybe retell what they say in home language.

# Discussing topics

- Try discussing topics and books that are being send to them from school in home language.
- This will not only reinforce their learning but also enable you to teach the specific words and notions around that theme in your home language.
- For example, if your child is learning about a certain historical event or figure in English, you can reinforce that learning by presenting it a different way and discussing it in your language.
- Especially if you want to foster literacy in both languages it is important to discuss the topic of a text or book in the home language so that the child really gets the meaning of the text in both the school and home language. Be creative with it!

# Older children

- Of course, the moment will come when homework becomes too complex to do it in home language, but usually it will happen towards the end of primary school and in secondary school and your children should be working on their homework mostly independently by then.
- You can still continue discussing school related things in the home language throughout their education journey!
- You can decide to help your children with their homework in English also beyond early years of school, but if they get stuck on a word or concept, you can explain it in your home language. It could help them see it in a different way and move past any cognitive barriers they may have.

# Beyond

- Finally, just a word of caution, you most probably will have a hard time maintaining any hard-and-fast rule. When a child is struggling with a concept and has a test tomorrow, to insist on using only home language words to describe it, that he or she has never heard until just now, is not going to help further the understanding of the concept. So, if your most important goal is understanding the schoolwork, flexibility is going to be a must.
- Having said all this, if your child is not struggling academically you should not be too flexible about the language you use when helping them with their homework. Why? If you use home language, you can help them become a balanced bilingual adult who can really function, do the "hard stuff" like math and science and correct grammar, in two or more languages. So, use your home language as much as possible.

# Using time to teach children reading and writing in home languages

- The technique of reading and writing is transferable. Thus, if a child has learned to read in one language, it is usually not too difficult for them to apply their skills to a second one with which they are already acquainted.
- Some children virtually teach themselves to read in home language having once learned how to read in English. Others need a good deal of help in learning how to read in a second language.
- If you have done some basic literacy work before they started school in the form of sharing books and looking at number and letter books in home language, your children should pick up reading in your home language relatively quickly.
- Usually with the reading you can wait until the end of Reception before starting to introduce reading in home language just so your children had a chance to focus on the task of learning phonics and deciphering English.



# Look for clues

- It is generally inadvisable to teach a child to read two languages simultaneously in a formal way. This should, however, by no means discourage parents from continuing games with words and letters in an informal way as long as the child is interested and receptive.
- One informal approach is the "lap method". The child sits on the parent's lap while the parent reads to them. They have ample opportunity to see the words while they hear them, thereby synchronizing the audio and the visual.
- If a child wants to learn how to read in home language and is enthusiastic about learning, this is a clear indication that they can handle it and that it is a good time for the parents to teach them. If the child has difficulty mastering reading in English at school or needs a great deal of help with reading in English, it is probably advisable not to press them to read in home language until they feel ready, or until reading and writing in English is well established.