

# What about bilingualism?

## Parents' frequently asked questions

**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.

**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 England 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. The school teacher should be asked whether she thinks that the child is simply not wanting to talk until he feels he can do it well or whether he has been teased and is unhappy. If you stop speaking your home language to your child he will feel cut off from everything he has known previously and this might make the situation worse. Plus, confidence in the home language will help him learn English.

You could play games with him, such as guessing the correct English word for items on a tray; seeing who can keep speaking English for the longest time etc. He needs lots of praise and above all he needs you to continue speaking your language to him.

**My wife and I are different nationalities, with different languages. We live in England and our baby and young daughter will be educated here. What language should we be speaking to our children?**

Children will not get confused by learning more than one language in the household. Up until about the age of 10 or 12, children learn foreign languages almost as if they were one big language. As children, people process language in the frontal lobe of the brain, but later on, the brain has to "scramble" to find storage space somewhere else.

Importantly, learning two or more languages can help a child's development in a mother tongue. It is important for you both to speak to the baby in a language that is natural and fluent for you. It's also important that the baby gets good models of whichever languages are going to be used, so not French dotted with English, for example. Although consistency is important, i.e. one parent speaks one language to the child, that doesn't mean the child should never hear the parent using another language or that there aren't situations during which you may decide it would be appropriate to use the other 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. It is generally a reflection of the lack of political status and power of the people who speak it. 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. A child who develops good use of their family's language is more likely to develop good English. But if parents use English instead, children will lose their mother tongue. Neither language will progress and the child may have problems in both.

It is important to remember that the younger a child is the easier it is to learn a language. Also children can feel left out in their families when everyone around them is speaking a language they cannot understand.

My children tell me not to speak my language to them in the school playground or in public. Children quickly find out that English is widely used and a powerful language around them. They might pick up the message that other languages are less valuable. You should keep speaking their first language, even if the child answers in English. Children will understand what has been said and continue learning the language. Parents can also use their home language to tell stories and sing songs with their children and watch TV programmes or films and talk about them together. Although it may be hard work to keep up their first language, children will thank their parents when they are older and they understand the advantages of being bilingual.

The school should be encouraged to see bilingualism as an extra skill which the child has. 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.

My child is three years old and is only just beginning to speak. She sees a speech therapist to help her. I've asked my friend for advice who has suggested that we stop speaking our first language in the house and speak only English as otherwise my daughter will become confused. Our English is not very good.

There is no evidence that bilingualism will make it harder for children with speech problems to develop speech. If you stop speaking your language to your child who already has a speech problem there is a possibility that the child will become even more isolated and struggle to speak. A child with a speech problem needs to be surrounded by speech and people who feel confident in their use of language so that she has positive role models and lots of opportunities to acquire language.

If there are any concerns about a child's speech development it is best to consult a speech and language therapist as soon as possible.

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. It's a sign of strength - she is making use of all the language she has.

I have remarried and my new husband does not speak our language. I want my children to speak only English at home now so that my husband can understand us.

Can you explain to your husband the advantages of bilingualism and the importance of the mother tongue to the children's identity? He might decide he wants to be bilingual too! You can also explain to the children that there are times when English will be used in the family but this will only be some of the time.

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