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Raising Children With More Than One Language: Friends say we should. A Guide for Parents what to do!

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Most immigrants will experience their children learning English faster than they do. They may also experience the children replying in English while they speak their mother tongue to them. Why? Because children want to fit in with their peers - desperately - and because they hear English so much more.

Is it important to keep the home language up, even if the kids want to speak English? Let us explain what is important and why. First some words which are important to understand in this context.

What is bilingualism?

Bilingualism is the ability to use two languages for communication.

Active bilingualism means that a person can communicate in two languages, e.g. speaking Tagalog at home and English at work or school.

Passive bilingualism means that a person can understand two languages. They will understand their grandmother speaking Tagalog (or German, or Cree, etc.) to them, but will respond in English.

What is multilingualism?

The word "multilingualism" is used when a person can communicate in more than two languages.

How common is bilingualism in Canada?

Canada is officially a bilingual country. According to the recent Census, 18% of Canadian residents are bilingual in the two official languages (English and French). But there are many more bilinguals in Canada! 23% of Canadian residents are bilingual in an official language and a non-official one: either an aboriginal language or an immigrant language. So 41% of Canadians speak more than one language!

What are the advantages of bilingualism?

The most obvious advantage to being able to communicate in two languages is obvious! This can be good for maintaining family ties or connections to one's country of origin, or it can be an asset when looking for a job. Most federal government jobs require English and French, and a third language may be an asset.

What is the most important reason to speak 2 or 3 languages?

It helps to maintain your own sense of cultural identity. It also helps navigate different cultures with different rules! There are also cognitive advantages of bilingualism: bilingual people have a better attention span, faster processing, and are better at switching between tasks—all of this means that bilingual children tend to do better in school. Also, bilingualism slows down cognitive decline in older people.
(Read more: http://dana.org/Cerebrum/2012/The_Cognitive_Benefits_of_Being_Bilingual/)

What are the disadvantages of bilingualism?

There are none, but it takes work to maintain your mother tongue, and not just speak English. It also takes attention to be able to adjust to more than one culture, e. g. so you fit in at work and at home.

Why would this be worth my effort as a parent towards my children?

In a simplified way, there are huge advantages far beyond speaking and communication. You may have noticed that you change your culture when you speak a different language, e.g. Canadians are overly careful with criticizing others. In Germany, we are pretty straight forward, and say it as it is, however, we focus on the facts. Canadians may be very polite, but sometimes, their opinion has to be guessed, because they try to be so polite. This shows that it has advantages to have two cultures, you can adjust more, and your brain is actually more flexible. You may think faster or be more flexible.

I want to pass my mother tongue on to my children. How do I do this?

If you want to pass your mother tongue on to your children, you know that, once they start school, they will hear (and use) a lot more English. For them to really learn your mother tongue, they need to hear and speak it enough -ideally most of the time. They can hear you talking or reading to them, letting them watch movies, listen to the radio, CDS or podcasts in your mother tongue. The more they hear, the more they can learn! All of this will help the children develop **passive bilingualism**: the ability to understand your mother tongue. And with your own language comes your own culture.

What strategies are best to keep the family language?

One important strategy is to develop a "family language policy": the parents need to be very consistent which strategy to use for maintaining the mother tongue for themselves. Only then will it be possible to influence your children. Parents need to communicate their intention to the children and remind them to use the mother tongue at home. Research has proven two good models for language learning:

1. Always speak your heritage language at home
2. Or one parent speaks one language, the other parent another one

Which model you choose, depends on your family. If you and your spouse share a mother tongue, then Option 1 may work well for you: you and your spouse simply use your mother tongue at home all the time. Try not to use English at all! So your kids will have no choice but follow your example.

However, if you and your spouse have different mother tongues, then it may be better to choose Option 2: e. g. the mother uses only her mother tongue, while the father uses English. In both cases, it is important to regularly remind children to respond in the desired language. "I have to remind my son about 20 times a day, at least!" said one language teacher.

Most immigrant languages are not taught in the public school system, but in many places, there are "Heritage Language Schools" that teach many different languages in the evening or on weekends. Check if there's a school for your mother tongue in your area and consider enrolling your children. This will help them develop a peer group with whom to speak their heritage language. (Also, consider volunteering! Most language schools are desperate for help.) Here is a list of Heritage Language Schools in Saskatchewan: http://www.heritagelanguages.sk.ca/home/ (click on "Language schools")

Another important aspect is to instill pride in the cultural and linguistic heritage in your children. As they get older, they may feel ashamed at being "different" from their classmates and may want to distance themselves from their heritage for "wanting to blend in". Help them develop positive attitudes towards their heritage by maintaining your traditions, and participating in cultural events. The most effective way is to go visiting your country of origin with or without your children. By showing them how much you value your heritage, you teach them to value it as well. You have to live the example.

Questions and Answers:

I am worried that by speaking only my mother tongue at home, my children will have a disadvantage when they start school and don't know any English.
Don't worry! As soon as the kids start Kindergarten, their English will explode (almost literally). Only a few months after they start, they will be perfect English speakers - and they may try to stop speaking your mother tongue! You will be positively surprised.

I have heard that bilingual children often struggle with spelling more than monolingual ones.
This is not true. Some people struggle with spelling more than other people, but being bilingual has nothing to do with it.

My child always "mixes" her two languages, rather than just speaking one language at a time.
This is very common in bilingual people, which doesn't mean it should be encouraged. One strategy is to repeat your child's utterance by rephrasing it in your mother tongue. Or you can point it out to your child: "Just use one language at a time!"

My child has perfect English, but his other language isn't that good. He makes mistakes and cannot write it as well as English. What can I do?
One thing is to accept this: since he hears so much more English than his other language, it is not surprising that his English is better. Still, there are things you can do: gently draw his attention to mistakes by rephrasing what he said, so it sounds good; enroll him in a heritage language school; send him on an extended vacation to his grandparents; find movies to watch and books to read… Make sure though that you don't correct mistakes in a negative way so he does not feel poorly about his language.

My first child is pretty good about speaking my mother tongue to me, but the younger ones aren't: they only want to speak English.
This is very common: the first child "brings English home" and then the younger ones pick it up. This is where consistency and persistence come in. Make it clear to *all* of your children that you expect them to use the mother tongue with you. This does not make you old fashioned, but it keeps you connected to your home culture. This is exactly what you also want to achieve for your children.

I always speak my mother tongue to my child, but she always responds in English. What to do?
Be patient, and remind her again and again to use your mother tongue when addressing you. You can even pretend not to understand when she speaks English!

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