

# Raising Bilingual Children

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The idea of raising bilingual children is both appealing and possible for more and more families these days, and growing up with more than one language certainly has its advantages in today's global village. Yet bilingualism really isn't something that simply happens. Raising kids to be successful in more than one language requires some careful planning and learning about bilingual language development.

The reasons for choosing to raise kids with two or more languages are as varied as the families themselves. Even the word "bilingualism" has different meanings for different families. For some families, having the ability to listen in two languages but speak in just one may constitute bilingualism, while other parents expect their kids not only to be bilingual, but also literate in both languages. Whatever the goals for developing bilingualism in each family may be, success appears to depend on whether a "language plan" has been worked out in advance. Families who take the time to consider how their kids will develop two languages, and who make the necessary commitments to bilingual language development, tend to be more successful in raising bilingual children.

If you're thinking about bringing up your children bilingually, it's a good idea to clarify your own definition of bilingualism. Language proficiency can be evaluated in terms of listening, speaking, reading and writing. You could also add a fifth area of speech and language, in which a person is able to use one or both languages for reasoning, to your definition of bilingualism. A person may speak only on language but have listening comprehension in two languages. Another may listen and speak in two languages but reading and writing ability in only one.

The term *balanced bilingualism* is used to describe individuals who possess about the same fluency in two languages, while *semilingualism* refers to those who have deficiencies in both languages compared with monolinguals. These deficiencies could be in a reduced vocabulary, incorrect grammatical patterns, difficulty thinking or expressing emotions in one of the languages, etc. Few people are truly balanced bilinguals in both languages in all situations. One language is usually dominant. This dominance may be different for listening and speaking or for reading and writing and usually changes over time.

At any rate, it's most useful to define for yourself what type of bilingualism is important and necessary in your family, within your community and culture, in order to plan a strategy for raising kids with the ability to use more than one language.

Most of us are able to learn a second language at any time in our lives. And, though no critical age for bilingual language development has been found, kids do tend to develop more native-like pronunciation when bilingualism begins before adolescence. Two types of childhood bilingualism have been defined. The first is simultaneous learning of two languages, which tends to be affected by four key factors:

- The parents' ability in one or more languages. Some parents speak only one language, the language of the home, and are unable to speak the language of the school and possibly of the community.
- The parents' actual use of language with the child. The parents may have language ability in two or more languages but have made a decision about which language they speak with the child.
- The language or languages other family members speak with the child, such as the language spoken between siblings or between children and grandparents.
- The last factor is the language the child uses in the community.

The second type of childhood bilingualism is called sequential or successive bilingualism. This happens when a child has one established language before learning a second language, whether in preschool or later (the age of three usually separates simultaneous and sequential language learning). Some kids and adults, of course, usually learn a second language formally through school or language classes.

Families who take the time to discuss their goals for language development often see their kids acquire higher levels of language skills in both languages. Parents need to talk about how bilingualism will be achieved for their children, looking at what language strategies will be used by each parent, what is being taught at school, and what areas need to be emphasized outside of school.

Experts stress separating the languages to make language acquisition easier for kids. When kids are learning two languages at the same time parents need to work out language strategies that emphasize boundaries between the languages. For example:

- One parent, one language. Each parent consistently speaks one language while the other parent speaks another language (usually each on speaking his or her native language to the child and possibly the common language to each other).
- Both parents speak one language in the home and a second language is used at school.
- One language is used in the home and at school and the second language is used in the community.
- Both parents speak both languages to the child but separate the languages according to speaking situations or alternate days.

Consistency is key in early language learning. If you mix languages in the same conversation, young kids experience difficulty separating vocabulary and grammar into the appropriate language. The child may learn the "mixed" language as one hybrid language.

Parents also need to consider how to strike a balance between the languages. If a child attends school in one language all day and has only a short time to hear the other language at home, it's likely the school language will develop more easily than the home language. Parents have to plan for additional time spent using the home language in a variety of situations and with a variety of speakers. Rich language experiences in both languages are essential for good bilingual development.

The quality of the language interaction is also very important. The language used shouldn't be too complex and parents should learn to expand their child's language as well as give encouragement and approval. Parents need to be good listeners and good language models by introducing rich vocabulary and varied conversations. Providing books, music, and even videos in both language is also important.

Parents should also be aware of individual difference among children. Each child learns language at his or her own speed. This is related to a variety of factors, such as:

- Stability and mobility. A family that remains in the second language community for a longer period of time will increase the chances of the child retaining the second language.
- Relationships within the family affect bilingual language development. For example, if the father speaks a different language than the mother, but frequent trips take him away from home, the child will not learn his language as easily as the mother's.
- Attitudes toward each language expressed by the parents, other family members, the school, the community and especially the child, will affect the development of one or both of the languages. Both languages must be given importance and a sense of worth in all aspects of the child's life. All kids have a need and a desire to communicate when language experiences are positive and meaningful.

Knowing two or more languages truly gives kids so many advantages in life. Bilingual kids have the advantage of knowing two cultures, of being able to communicate with a wider variety of people, and of possible economic advantages in their future. Research has even shown advantages in thinking skills among bilingual individuals. But deciding to raise bilingual kids is a decision that should be carefully considered as it affect children for the rest of their lives. Parents need to consider the child's self identity, self-esteem, schooling options, as well as social factors when planning for bilingualism. Becoming bilingual is a special gift parents can offer their children, but the gift must be planned and presented with care for it to be well used and appreciated.