

What is Normal?

*A presentation by Lia Timson to guests at the seminar **Bilingualism – An Open Door to The World** held at the Harbord Literature Institute, Harbord, NSW, Australia on May 24, 2008*

Paula asked me to start our mini-presentations today because she thinks I'm good at starting things. You may know that it was I and my good friend Karin Alfonso that started the Brazilian playgroup – the Brincando Playgroup - in Manly almost nine years ago.

What you may not know is that it was Karin who actually gave me the *push* I needed to get it started. That's because we all have good intentions and ideas, but I find most of us need a little push, a little help to get things going and stick to it.

That's what we hope we can give you here today. A little *help* so that your dream of relating to your child in Portuguese, of giving them a true bicultural identity, can come true.

When Karin and I started the playgroup, we did so because we felt, subconsciously, that if we were the only ones that spoke Portuguese to our children, the children would quickly brand us “nagging mums” and we would lose our battle before it even started.

That's because it doesn't take children, even a 6-month old, any time at all to discover that English *is* the way of life here, and everything else is, well, hard work they can do without.

I'll give you an example. I once had my youngest son and his best friend – let's call him Luke - in the car. They were about 2.5 years old each. Somehow Portuguese came up in the conversation – I think because of a CD that was playing.

Trying to make them all feel at ease and knowing that Luke's family hailed from Italy, I said to him:

“You speak another language too, don't you? You speak a little bit of Italian because of your nona.”

To which he replied: “No. My *nona* speaks Italian. *I* speak **normal**.”

Now, that is exactly what I feared might happen to my own children if I didn't start the playgroup and didn't find other little friends for them to relate to in Portuguese.

Children need to feel they are one in the same. They don't like being different (at least not until their teenage hormones start going mad).

They like to feel there are other children in the same boat as them. Parents like that too.

And being with other mums and dads that also spoke the language, reading our traditional stories, playing Brazilian nursery rhymes, doing Brazilian craft, celebrating o Dia do Índio, having *fun* together. ..

We felt these things would allow them to truly understand their identity and therefore accept it better.

We didn't want our children to speak Portuguese at home, then go to school and leave that side of them at the gate, pretending they didn't have it.

We knew that Normal is NOT normal.

We knew that to describe a monolingual society as normal, was to settle for the lowest common denominator, to forget what thousands of migrants and ancestors have contributed to today's communities.

Normal in Switzerland is to speak four languages.

Normal in China, depending where you go, it's to speak three.

Normal is what we are used to. Abnormal is prejudice.

So we tried very hard from the very beginning to help the children feel NORMAL in their **own** way – feel at ease in their bicultural skin.

We wanted them not only to speak Portuguese and be proud of their Brazilian heritage, but we also wanted them to understand why their little feet would one day move to the samba beat, why they may cry at the World Cup, why they may want to speak with their hands – when the rest of the society around them may not.

We wanted them to know where they came from and accept it.

And I'm very proud to say they have. Those whose parents have been making an effort – and I say that because it's not easy – have come to accept and enjoy their two, sometimes three or four cultures – and be proud of it. Making friends, practising and valuing the cultures, has helped them a lot.

It has helped them with their English to, I might add.

A study studied of four different groups of families a few years ago: two groups in Chinese and two in Arabic families proved this. In each language, the research compared those who chose NOT to speak their home language to the children for fear they would be left behind at school with those who insisted on keeping their home language despite the fact that they were trying to fit into their new country. What it found was staggering.

The families who tried their hardest to speak English at home - despite their poor knowledge of the language - produced children who were poor English speakers, readers and thinkers.

Those who spoke only Chinese or Arabic at home and spoke no English, produced grade 1 students in English. Why?

The research concluded it was because the families that spoke Chinese or Arabic to their children instilled in them a love of languages.

They had rich conversations, they read, told stories, showed emotions, played music from their homeland. The children attained a good level of that language and they sought to increase their knowledge of English acquired at school and on the street, to the same high level.

Those who spoke broken English at home couldn't read to their children, couldn't express their emotions, and couldn't hold meaningful conversations, couldn't love them the only way they knew how. They drove an edge between them and the next generation and the children learned to get by with very simple, basic English which they never sought to improve because their example wasn't at all inspiring.

I had a very simple example of this in my own house when my first son was little – about 2, I think. He was talking to his Australian granddad and said something was “too difficult”. Grandpa Dick was over the moon. The thought this child was *so* clever *so eloquent*. I looked at him as if to say, ‘what do you mean’? And he went on and on about how the average Australian two-year-old would never use the word “difficult” in that situation. They would use “hard”, because that’s how their parents talk. But James, *his* grandchild, was clever because he used a difficult word – the word *difficult*.

I knew then that what James was really doing, was searching for the corresponding word to “difícil” which is an everyday word for us in Portuguese. I knew then, that he would always strive to enrich his English to the same level I was able to help him enrich his Portuguese and vice-versa.

The department of education here in NSW has in fact published a list of the advantages they believe students develop when studying a second language:

- understanding of languages as a system
- strategies to deduce meaning
- pattern recognition skills
- enhanced comprehension skills
- better understanding of grammar
- better understanding of English

Source: Department of Education and Training (DET), NSW, 2002.

Add to that the ability to see the world in two different ways means they become less set in their way and more flexible and tolerant in their attitudes towards others. And everyone knows we need more tolerance in this world.

So, our original Playgroup children grew and with them what is now the Brazilian association – the ABCD. Parents started saying, ‘now that they are speaking and accepting Portuguese, we don't want them to stop when they go to school’.

So we started Portuguese classes after school. Then came the bilingual program at Warringah Mall Kindergarten, the events, and the opportunities to be together and share a parallel culture. In other words, to have the best of both worlds.

At the moment we're continuing to grow, trying to introduce Portuguese to a High school so the children can take advantage of all the hard work they've put in place to learn and keep their Portuguese and use it to their advantage at the HSC – the high school certificate. Only then and later in adulthood will they truly understand and value this language *you* insisted on teaching them.

They won't understand it now, when they answer you back in English or say they don't want to go to Portuguese class because they prefer ballet or soccer. They *will* understand it later. And the *only* way you will know they have come to understand it is by the *absence* of that tone teenagers master so well and the phrase:

“You had an opportunity to teach me a language. Why didn't you?”

_____ (ends)