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Raising Bilingual Children

By Lia Timson

If you are concerned that teaching your child your mother tongue as well as English will slow their speech development, read on. Experts say there are only advantages to being multilingual.

Dr John Gibbons, senior lecturer in bilingualism at the University of Sydney, says children who are raised bilingually from a very young age turn out slightly more intelligent and accommodating than children in a monolingual upbringing.

“They tend to be more flexible because they already have two ways of construing the world. They become more objective instead of locked into one particular vision,” he says. Bilingual children are also statistically better at map reading and mathematics, both language forms in their own right.

According to Dr Gibbons, parents who have access to a second language should persist in passing it on to the children early, as language learning in adulthood is harder.

“If kids have a chance to learn a language almost painlessly, why wouldn’t you make the effort?”, he asks.

It is also not necessary for both parents to speak the other language for a child to learn, but consistency is key.

He recommends parents try to maintain certain areas of life for the exclusive domain of the second language.

“It doesn’t have to be one-parent-one-language,” he says.

“It can be one context or one place, but has to be made clear. That also means it has a point to it.”

Aiding bilingual development

Dr Sandra McMahon, Queensland president of Speech Pathology Australia, advises parents in bilingual households do what all other parents should do: “Talk to them!”.

“Parents should be constantly labeling objects and actions according to the child’s ability. “Children need exposure to both languages. The main thing is to understand that same words mean the same thing,” Dr McMahon says.

In their book *What to expect the first year*, authors Arlene Eisenberg, Heidi Murkoff and Sandee Hathaway say it is vital parents forget about “teaching” and instead immerse the child in the second language.

“Play games in it, read books in it, sing songs in it, listen to tapes and watch videos in it, visit friends who are fluent in it and, if possible, visit places where the language is spoken.”

At school age, the child should be taught to read and write in the second language in order for it to take on greater usefulness.

“If classes aren’t available at school, tutoring or computer-programmed learning may be a good idea,” they add.

Dr Gibbons also recommends the cultural richness of the second language be explored.

“In Spanish, for example, videos of flamenco dancing – all that vitality and music – makes the whole thing more worthwhile.”

The constant presence of a valued person who speaks the language exclusively – such as a loved grandma – also helps.

And it is important to keep the process informal. “Parents shouldn’t force the child to speak. It’s got to be a pleasure, not a pain,” Dr Gibbons adds.

Monitoring development

With one in seven Australians having some communication difficulty and most parents expecting bilingual children to speak later, Dr McMahon, suggests parents be aware of the communication levels appropriate for their child’s age.

“At two years of age they should really be saying lots of words and putting two words together to make short sentences,” she says.

“If by then they are not using either language fairly well, they should be checked to see if there is no underlying language problem.”

By three, children should be having simple conversations with adults and be easily understood.

Dr Mahon says speech delays can arise from a variety of issues, including understanding difficulties, intellectual disability, hearing problems and malfunction of the muscles required for speaking.

However, bilingualism alone should not be reason for delayed language development.

“The theory is that if it starts at a very early age, in a normal situation children should be able to cope with two or three languages very easily,” Dr McMahon adds.

Readers’ Boxes

Lilian Wales, mother of Nicholas [6/4/1995], Cecilia [23/11/1996] and Phillip [21/4/1998].

“We were convinced we wanted to speak Danish to them from the start because we are both Danish and might want to go back to Denmark one day. We’ve had a very positive experience. I’ve had other people giving me dirty looks because I wasn’t teaching my children English. But we were lucky that at day care they understood and made an effort. Of course, at the beginning there was some difficulty but Nicholas was never uncomfortable to go there. If I speak English to Nicholas now he asks me to speak in Danish. Cecilia is just starting to talk. She picks up English words just as easily. Our family and friends keep us in touch with lots of Danish books and videos. We also have the family out here once a year and try to go back to Denmark every second year.”

Tip: “Be persistent. Don’t be discouraged by other people who think teaching your language to the children is the wrong thing.”

Stephanie Cummings, German-born married to an Australian, mother of Josh (21/2/95), Nathan, (6/1/96) and Tristan (4/1/97).

“Raising the children bilingually was always on my agenda. I had a German book on the subject and that helped. But I find it fairly difficult. English is a lot easier for the children to learn and express themselves. I find it very hard to stand up to the pressure around them with their friends, kindy teachers, playgroups and their father. Now when Josh asks the name of something, I tell him in German and then he wants to know what daddy says. Between themselves the kids speak English, but they use German words for things they only use at home, like “blanket”. All we hope for is that one day they’ll appreciate the gift they were given; that the basis is there and will be useful to them somehow.”

Tip: “I try to sing German songs and play German games so they realise there is fun to be had in German as well.” (Stephanie is the coordinator for the German Playgroup in Manly, NSW.)

Christiane Denis, German-born married to a Frenchman, mother of Helena [21 Oct 1995] and Nicholas [10 June 1997].

“My husband always speaks French to the children and I speak German. Between us we speak English. At the beginning we thought the children may have a problem learning English but Helena now speaks English 70 percent of the time. As soon as she meets somebody who doesn’t speak English she switches to either French or German. She started talking very early. By 18 months she could already swap between ‘thank you’, ‘duncan’ and ‘merci’ to the right people. Our son is a bit confused. He still doesn’t talk much but he understands all three languages. At the beginning we thought three languages might be too much. But which one would we chose? We just try to give them the basis and see how we go. I think the result we’ll see in a few years.”

Tip: “If you start from the beginning, you’ll always use the language with the kids.”