



RAISING A Bilingual Child

As we all know, a large number of Americans are either immigrants or children or grandchildren of immigrants. Many United States residents, therefore, have parents or grandparents who arrived to these shores speaking another language. While 65% of the world population speaks at least two languages in their everyday life, most children in the United States eventually become dominant, or even monolingual, in English. Many parents would like to have their children remain fluent in their home language, but worry about the ramifications of a decision to raise their children to be bilingual.

There are many good reasons for children to be fluent in more than one language. In our multicultural age, it is, of course, both socially and professionally valuable to be able to communicate with a wide variety of people of different cultures. More immediately, however, having children speak the language of their families creates a bridge between generations, which makes it easier for children to forge a connection with their older relatives. In some cases, this connection is with relatives who remain in the home country, who are now more accessible than in the past both through eased communication

and greater travel opportunities.

Since languages differ in the way they describe reality, knowing two languages also helps bilingual speakers learn that people can construe the world in more than one way. Anyone who speaks more than one language knows that certain words or expressions are almost untranslatable because they reflect the unique culture of the speakers of that language. Thus, speaking the language of the family also allows children to partake in the culture of their heritage more fully.

Learning a language early in life is an almost effortless means to fluency, and once children know two languages, learn-

ing additional languages becomes much easier. While bilingualism will not make children smarter overall, research suggests that bilingual children have advantages in areas such as cognitive processing and overall language awareness. These advantages depend on their degrees of fluency and literacy in each language.

The amount of the non-dominant language that children learn to speak tends to be influenced by their closeness to the speakers of their language of origin. First generation immigrants, children of parents who do not speak English, tend to be exclusively exposed to their home lan-

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language until they enter preschool. Grandchildren of immigrants differ in the amount of exposure they have to their home language. Heritage language learners — such as speakers of Yiddish, who have maintained multilingualism for hundreds of years — are children whose mother tongue has been transmitted to the third or fourth generation. Heritage language learners are raised in a broad range of linguistic contexts, both at home and in their communities.

Two types of childhood bilingualism have been defined to differentiate the circumstances under which these languages are learned. The first is simultaneous learning of two languages. For example, two parents may speak to the child in different languages, or the child may hear one language at home and another in the community. The second is sequential, where the child is raised in only one language and encounters a second language once he is in school because it is the dominant language of the country or when it is taught in formal study.

Many parents have expressed the concern that exposing children to two

languages and expecting them to learn both will confuse them. This is not the case. While there is anecdotal evidence that children who grow up hearing two languages simultaneously start talking a bit later than their peers, most research confirms that children's language learning is not affected. In fact, many, many children throughout the world grow up with two, or even more, languages from infancy and do not show any signs of language delay in either language.

Some parents are also concerned that their children will have difficulty learning the language of their new country if they continue to speak in the language of their heritage at home. This, too, has proven not to be the case, as children tend to learn the majority language quickly, given sufficient exposure.

Parents who hear their children switching back and forth between languages may suspect that this is the result of a deficiency in their children's knowledge of both languages. In fact, what is known as "code switching" can be a sign of mastery of both languages. The amount of code switching that takes place in one conversation is the result of how much of this

children hear at home and how much is accepted in their community.

Parents who wish their children to be bilingual must make a conscious decision that this is important to them, for helping a child remain bilingual demands effort on the part of parents. There are degrees of bilingualism that range from the passive bilingual — those who understand a second language but have difficulty speaking, reading, or writing it — to true bilinguals, who are equally adept at speaking, reading, writing, and even thinking in two languages. The latter, of course, is harder to achieve, but even being passively bilingual has benefits and makes it easier to learn the language later in life.

Some hints that will help parents raise a bilingual child:

- **Have a positive attitude** — children will mostly echo the attitude of their parents and older siblings towards speaking the minority language.
- **Give positive feedback** — children will echo this positivism if their efforts at speaking the language are met with enthusiasm, and if parents are not criti-

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Bilingualism and the Special Needs Child

Research strongly bears out the idea that bilingualism alone is not a reason for delayed language development. If exposure to different languages starts at an early age, in a normal situation children should be able to cope with more than one language easily.

It is important to distinguish between the popular use of the term "language delay" in reference to a child who is perceived to take longer than his peers to begin speaking but who is well within the normal range, and the clinical term — which refers to significant delays in development of language that are associated with a specific disorder or are secondary to another disorder, such as Autism Spectrum Disorder.

Children with disorders such as Down syndrome or other handicaps can learn several languages, of course within the realm of their own limitations. A multilingual environment does not seem to be an added burden for such children. On the contrary, limiting the child to one language can hinder him from communicating with close family members.



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cal or harsh when they make mistakes or slip into the other language. Repeating the child's thought in the minority language without further comment is usually sufficient.

- **Be consistent** — if parents mix languages, children will do the same. There are many ways to maintain consistency, such as speaking only one language at home and another language outside the home or having each parent speak one language. But, children need to hear a language for 30% of their waking hours if they are to learn it well.
- **Provide a rich linguistic environment** — people who speak one language well can more easily speak another language well. Parents need to be good models by introducing rich vocabulary and varied conversations in the minority language and expanding the child's experiences in that language through books, music, videos, and contact with others who speak the language.
- **Talk, talk, talk** — while other media can reinforce the minority language, human interaction is the best way for a child to learn.
- **Have fun singing and telling/reading stories in each language** — children acquire a rich vocabulary and learn about how each language is structured through singing and interactive story telling.
- **Respect individual differences** — as in all areas of education, all children are not the same, and one child may learn more easily than another.
- **Be persistent** — even if the child resists, continue talking in the minority language. The child will be grateful later on. The first five years are the hardest!
- **Choose a school carefully** — it is important for the child to attend a school which respects his culture and his ability to speak another language.

The most important ingredient towards raising bilingual children, however, is commitment and planning on the part of parents. Giving children the ability to speak in two languages is a unique gift that parents can give children who grow up in households where a language other than English is spoken. †

Yeled v'Yalda Dual Language Policy

YVY serves over 2,000 children, and 70% of these children do not speak English at home. Yiddish, Spanish, Russian, Arabic, Farsi/Persian, Hebrew, and Haitian Creole are only some of the home languages of children enrolled in YVY. YVY's Dual Language Policy was designed to help these children by respecting and helping them preserve their home language while teaching them English so they can succeed in school and in life.

The Yeled V'Yalda Dual Language Policy has several components, including:

- In classrooms at sites where the majority of children come from the same language background, YVY provides at least one education professional (the teacher or the assistant teacher) who is fluent in the child's language.
- In classrooms at sites where a range of languages are spoken and no language clearly dominates, YVY provides at least one or two education professionals who speak most of the languages that the children speak.
- A lending library at each site has books in the Home Languages of the children.
- Organized cultural events at YVY sites, such as music, dance, puppetry performances, and cooking events celebrate the home cultures of the children and their families.
- For bilingual children who need speech therapy, YVY provides Speech and Language pathologists who have bilingual certifications in the relevant/appropriate language.
- For bilingual children who receive services at home, home visitors speak the language and understand the culture of the families they serve.
- For the parents of bilingual children, YVY offers workshops on prevention of obesity and on good parenting practices, staffed by education professionals who speak the preferred language of the parents.

YVY's Dual Language Policy is part of YVY's longstanding commitment to providing a language-rich learning environment for children of all backgrounds — one that respects their home culture and helps them acquire the skills that will lead to success in school and in life.

The full text of YVY's Dual language Policy is available on the YVY website, www.yeled.org. The link to the YVY Research Institute, www.yeled.org/res.asp, can also inform parents about YVY's ongoing research into bilingualism and language acquisition.

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