Speech and Language Tips for Bilingual Families

A person who speaks two languages is considered bilingual. Much of the information in this handout also applies to people who are multilingual, or those who speak three or more languages.

WILL MY CHILD BE DELAYED IF THEY ARE LEARNING MORE THAN ONE LANGUAGE?

No. Hearing more than one language does not cause or raise your child’s risk of language delay. Children who grow-up learning two languages babble, say their first words and combine words at the same time as children who are learning one. In fact, learning two languages is common in many parts of the world!

MY CHILD MIXES TWO LANGUAGES. DOES THIS MEAN THEY ARE CONFUSED?

No. It is common for bilingual children and adults to use two different languages in the same sentence. People like to use the words they know the best. Sometimes they can “borrow” a word from one language while speaking another.

MY CHILD IS LATE TO TALK OR HAS SPECIAL NEEDS. SHOULD I SPEAK WITH THEM ONLY IN ENGLISH?

No. There is no evidence that children with delays or special needs learn better if they only hear one language. Children who have trouble with language may learn more slowly due to differences in their brain. Using one language instead of two will not change their rate of learning. All children can learn to communicate in two languages, including children with language delay/disorder, autism spectrum disorder and Down syndrome.

HOW CAN I RAISE MY CHILD TO BE BILINGUAL?

The best way to learn any language is by interacting face-to-face with fluent speakers. It is not a good idea to use a language with your child that you do not speak fluently or to try to teach your child a second language only from “screens” (such as apps, videos, TV, etc.).

To learn a language and continue speaking it, children need to listen and practice using the language regularly (for many hours several times a week or every day).

There is no one correct way to teach children to speak two or more languages. Choose from the options below that work best for your family.

A. Use one language in the home and the other language outside the home.

B. Use your home language in all situation and have your child regularly spend time with native speakers of the other language.

C. Have one parent/family member speak one language and another parent/family member speak the other language.

D. Speak to your child in one language for part of the day and in the other language for part of the day.

Did you know…?

Research shows that being bilingual can help children with some social skills and cognitive (thinking) skills, like attention and memory.
How should I prepare my child for school if I want to speak my own language in the home?

Always speak with your child in the language(s) you feel most comfortable. This will best help your child’s brain build strong language and thinking skills.

It is also a good idea for children to know some English before starting school. You can help your child by creating natural opportunities for them to hear English in the community. Take them to the playground, story time at the library, a playgroup or sign them up for an activity.

Did you know…?

Children who continue to speak their home language once they learn English have been shown to have:

- Better social skills and emotional regulation
- Stronger relationships with family
- Better grades in school

How can I help my child use my home language if they only want to speak English?

- When your child speaks to you in English, respond in your home language.
- Let your child know that speaking your home language is important to you and your family and teach them about your culture.
- Consider making it a family tradition to speak your home language in the home.
- Create opportunities for your child to interact with other people, especially other children, who speak your home language.
- If possible, take trips to a place where the home language is spoken.
- Enroll your child in an after-school or bilingual program where the home language is taught.

I am worried that my child is not speaking as well as they should. What should I do?

Whether your child knows one language or more, if you are worried about your child’s communication, ask their pediatrician for a referral to a Speech-Language Pathologist (SLP).