

Talk 2 Me



Preschool Speech and Language ~ Early Identification ~ Intervention ~ Education

Telephone: (519) 252-0636 Fax: (519) 252-7917 Email: info@smflc.ca

Children Acquiring Two Languages

Parents and Child Care professionals frequently ask us questions about preschoolers who are learning two languages.

What is the best way for a child to learn two languages?

There are two equally valid ways for a child to learn to speak two languages.

1. Simultaneous Bilingualism (under 3 years)

- Each parent speaks a different language in the home, i.e. Dad speaks English and Mom speaks Chinese. We call this the “one parent-one language” approach. It is important for the parents to remember not to mix the two languages when talking to their children. The children will quickly learn that Dad speaks one language and Mom speaks another.
- The parents both speak their heritage language at home and the child hears only the 2nd language with a caregiver every day.

2. Sequential Bilingualism (over 3 years)

- The child learns their heritage language at home and is exposed to the second language after the first one is established (at preschool, from peers, T.V., etc.)

What are the advantages to learning more than one language?

Learning two or more languages can be beneficial to a child’s language and learning abilities in school. They will develop:

- A larger vocabulary
- A greater awareness of how words and sounds rhyme, which helps when learning to write and spell.
- An appreciation of how words and sounds rhyme which can lead to a more creative use of language in talking and writing.
- Access to more than one culture.

Research shows that children who are strongly proficient in their language will become strongly proficient in English. They will also do better in reading.

Why should parents speak their heritage language at home?

- Children learn language best from people who are fluent in their language. Parents should speak the language that feels most comfortable to them. Their children will then be exposed to a richer variety of words and well-formed sentences.
- Relationships are closer when the parent is communicating in his/her most natural, fluent language. We call this the “language of love”.
- As children will be bombarded with the 2nd language outside of the home, parents should make a conscious effort to make sure their children are highly exposed to their heritage language every single through play, books, music and from continued exposure to relatives who speak the language. Children will not learn the heritage language just by incidental or occasional exposure.

Should a child with a language delay be raised with only one language?

There is no clear research to indicate that a child with a language delay should be exposed to only one language. This is the case even for children with severe language delays.

Ultimately, everyone must remember that the child’s parents must still be able to converse with them in their most fluent and comfortable language. A child with language delays will need a team approach with a Speech-Language Pathologist and other caregivers who work with the child to help the parents make a plan that is based on the child’s needs to communicate for different reasons with different people.

How can you identify a language delay in a child with two languages?

- If a child has a global developmental delay, we would expect the acquisition of all languages will be delayed.
- A true language delay will show up when the child is developing his first language.
- Children who are learning their second language (i.e. ESL) are not language delayed. There are many social and emotional factors that will determine how quickly and smoothly the child learns the new language.
- A true language-learning disability is hard to distinguish in a child learning two languages simultaneously. A careful complete assessment by a Speech-Language Pathologist is warranted.

How should preschool staff accommodate a child who arrives at a child care centre with no English?

- It is completely normal for a child to become silent for up to six months when he/she is first immersed in a new language. The length of the silent period will depend on the child's personality and conversational style.
- Within the first two to three months the child will adjust to the routines and begin to understand what is being said.
- Child care staff need to give the child a lot of individual attention. Show the child that you can communicate with body language, gestures and pictures to crack the English code.
- Model single words and simple phrases that express exactly what the child would say if he/she could.
- Use lots and lots of music, which is a wonderful, non-threatening way to teach language!
- Encourage the parents to teach you simple words and phrases in the child's first language. The child will be impressed if you try to use his/her language while he/she is trying to learn yours.

- Never, ever encourage the parents to switch to speaking English. It is not in the child's best interest! Although you may be sceptical, research shows that the child will learn to speak English faster if the parents continue to build a strong first language base at home.

When can you expect a child to be able to use the second language?

- After the silent period (up to six months) the child will begin to use the new language. In the beginning the child will mix the two languages.
- Within a year, depending on age, the child will begin to use social words and phrases such as "my turn".
- It takes three to four years to become totally fluent in social conversation.
- It takes five to seven years to learn the academic language required for school. Older children who are more advanced academically when they are immersed in the new language will pick up academic language faster than younger children. Older children will also learn vocabulary faster. However younger children are faster at picking up social conversation.
- We used to think that the critical period for learning a second a second language was before the age of seven. Research shows us that is not the case. After the age of seven, children will take several years to learn a second language but they will eventually catch up to their peers. The only exception to this is pronunciation. Teenagers learning a new language will find it more difficult to lose their original accent than younger children.

Will my child lose his/her first language?

- There is some research to suggest that if the first language is not maintained at home English will become the dominant language for a child by Grade 1 and the first language will be lost by Grade 3. Once it is gone, a language is hard to get back.
- Loss of a heritage language often has a negative effect on the family. The family has to make a concentrated effort to keep the children exposed to the language on a daily basis.

*Adapted from an article in WigWag March 1999
"Some things to Know about Children Acquiring Two Languages"
Claire Watson & Jim Cummins*