

How to raise a bilingual child

Practical guide for parents with ready-to-use activities



PEaCH
for bilingual children



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ready-to-use activities**

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Project

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1

Welcome

Welcome to the PEaCH guide for parents raising bilingual children!

Dear parent of a bilingual or a bilingual-to-be

If you are reading this, chances are that you have made the glorious choice of **raising a bilingual child**. What's more, you have come to the right place to find out how to do it! Our PEaCH guide has been designed to accompany you on the journey of bilingual parenting. It will help you to understand how bilingualism works, to turn it into a fun and rewarding experience for you and your child, and to tackle any challenges along the way.

Bilingualism as a concept is broader than many people think. In the PEaCH project, we stand by the definition of **François Grosjean**, renowned professor in psycholinguistics:

“

a bilingual is someone who regularly uses two or more languages or dialects in their everyday lives.

”

If you think about it, that covers a lot of people - more than half of the world's population, actually! Note that Grosjean doesn't mention a certain level of fluency required to be considered bilingual, or a specific number of languages. This is an important message. As long as you use more than one language, in whichever way or at whichever level, you are bilingual. Why are we telling you this? To take the pressure off you, and help you get started with the right mindset. Whatever level of fluency your child reaches in each of their languages, you are doing a wonderful job and giving them an **invaluable gift**.

About the project

This guide for raising bilingual children is one of the outcomes of PEaCH, an Erasmus+ project funded by the European Commission. The acronym PEaCH was derived from the main goal of our project: ‘preserving and promoting Europe’s cultural and linguistic heritage through empowerment of bilingual children and families’. Focusing on the 24 official EU languages, PEaCH wants to help both parents and educators of bilingual children to support their family languages. On our website, parents can consult this guide, as well as a large online collection of language learning materials in all EU languages and a set of videos with tips on how to pass on and maintain the family language(s). For teachers and educators, the project will develop a toolkit, providing advice on how to create a positive multilingual environment in the classroom and support parents in passing on the family language to their children. The PEaCH guide ‘How to raise a bilingual child’ is the first of the materials the PEaCH project will produce to support and promote bilingualism among EU families.

How does this guide work?

Our guide is structured in a way that you can easily navigate towards sections that apply to your family situation. Here’s an **overview** of the different chapters.

If you are still in any doubt as to whether or not to embark on this journey and need a final nudge, you may want to start with the [chapter on myths and benefits](#), where you’ll find a list of valid, research-based reasons why raising a bilingual child is always a valuable choice, and some common myths debunked.

Bilingual parenting starts with a plan. Before embarking on the journey, you decide where you want to go and how you want to get there. In the

first chapter, Who should speak what when - choosing the family language strategy, we encourage you to think about your goals and come up with a strategy that will help you achieve those goals.

And then it begins: your child's bilingual journey. In this main part of the handbook, we follow your child from the womb through to the age of twelve. The journey unfolds in **seven age brackets**, centred around important steps in your child's development. Keep in mind that these age brackets are by no means fixed. **Language is not an exact science**. Every child's language development is a unique evolution with several varying factors, so it's best to focus on steady progress instead of numbers. The age brackets are there to give a rough indication of what you can expect.

- 1 pregnancy
- 2 zero to 18 months
- 3 18 to 24 months
- 4 two to four years
- 5 four to six years
- 6 six to nine years
- 7 nine to 12 years

Within each age bracket, you'll find the following subsections:

What is happening?

A clear overview of children's language development from a multilingual perspective.

While a lot of it happens inside your child's head, there is more to development than genetics and buzzing brain cells. As children grow up, their languages interact with a whole range of social, educational and relational factors, which merge into one unique story. 'What is happening' helps you understand your child's bilingual journey.

Advice

Tips and guidance on how to approach the journey of bilingual parenting.

How can you support and motivate your child? What is an optimal environment to foster bilingualism? What can you do to make your child feel confident?

Activities

A list of ready-to-use activities you can do with your child to help develop and maintain their home language skills.

How to help them understand the home language, learn and pronounce new words, speak fluently, and so on. In the last three age brackets, we pay special attention to **literacy skills** in the home language. This is specifically for parents who want to foster their child's reading and writing skills. Note that you are not expected to do all the activities. They are **sorted from minimal to maximum effort**, so you can choose the ones that correspond to your child's ability, and adjust them according to how much time or resources you have. **Regularity is key**. The more you repeat an activity, the better your child will learn and remember. You'll find that some activities refer to our **PEaCH resources**. These are templates that you can download from our [website](#). In some activity sections, you'll find a **culture & heritage box** with tips on how to integrate your cultural heritage into the language activities.



What if I start now?

Advice for parents who want to introduce a second language at a later stage in their child's life.

The path laid out in this handbook implies that your child's bilingual journey starts from birth, but that's not always the case. Some parents speak the majority language with their child from birth and don't introduce their native language until later. For each age bracket, you will find tips on how to introduce your native language at that particular time in your child's life.

Questions and answers

Frequently Asked Questions that reflect insecurities, worries or challenges shared by many parents of bilingual children.

The Q&A's are sorted by age, but at the end of the guide there is a Q&A index that lists all the questions by topic.

After covering your child's bilingual journey until the age of twelve, this guide finishes with a few important aspects of bilingual upbringing in more detail. The chapter [How to positively deal with resistance from others](#) will tell you how best to react to people who express judgment or negative opinions about your choice to raise a bilingual child. In [Children who are late talkers](#), speech and language therapist Mary-Pat O'Malley explains what language delay is, how parents can spot it and what can be done about it. At the end of the guide, you'll find a [glossary](#) with explanations of some important terms that are used regularly throughout the guide.

Some reminders before we start

- The age brackets are not set in stone. They're a **rough indication** of what to expect; every bilingual child follows its own path. You are the best judge of your child's abilities. If you feel that they aren't ready for a certain activity, have a look at the previous age brackets. It's also possible that an activity for ages 6 to 9 is perfectly tailored to your 5-year-old.
- In the same vein: **do not compare** your child to other children. There are no two children with an identical journey. Focus on your child's **individual progress**.
- Being bilingual does not mean that you have to be fluent and know how to read and write. **Choose what works** for you and your family.
- Whatever you can do to help your child learn your language is a plus!
- It's **never too late** to take the first step.



2

Benefits & myths

2.1 Benefits of being a bilingual

If you have made the wonderful decision to raise a bilingual child, you can turn to this guide for information, activity ideas and answers to your questions. But what if you haven't decided yet? What if you're struggling with the 'why' question? It's easy to get lost in all the websites and leaflets, and you might have trouble weighing up the pros and cons. 'Cons' is a wrong choice of words, though. There really are no cons to raising a bilingual child. If anything, your child will benefit from it in many ways. Sure, you might stumble across challenges every now and then, but isn't that inherent to the bumpy yet rewarding ride that is parenting though? The most important message to remember is that **whatever you can do to help your child learn your language will be worth it**. If you're having doubts about the value of raising a bilingual child, or if you need a reminder of why you're doing it, here is an overview of the opportunities and advantages bilingualism will bring to your child.

Communication skills

Bilinguals are sensitive and responsive to the communicative expectations and needs of their conversation partners, because they are better at taking other people's perspectives.

Multicultural

Bilinguals are gifted with two worlds of experience instead of one. The best way to immerse in another culture and really connect with it, is to speak the language of that culture. On top of that, bilingual children can be a bridge between cultures and contribute to cross-cultural communication, as speaking the languages makes it easier for them to understand cultural differences.



Personality

Bilinguals tend to be more tolerant and show higher levels of empathy.

Family cohesion

Raising bilingual children who can speak the language of their family and friends abroad sustains important relationships and cherished traditions.

Cognitive advantages

Bilingualism does not only give you an advantage in terms of language skills – it enhances other cognitive functions as well. Bilinguals tend to

be more creative, they are better able to focus, and have an innate talent for multitasking and abstract thinking. They perform better at tasks that require conflict management and are likely to develop a higher level of metalinguistic awareness.

Educational success¹

Bilingual children are generally more likely to finish secondary school² and attend higher education³. They are also more likely to get hired for the job they applied for⁴. Listing more than one language on your resume is a nice bonus of being bilingual, isn't it?

Health advantages

Several studies have shown that lifelong bilinguals are better protected from the symptoms of dementia⁵. On average, symptoms develop five years later in bilinguals.



¹ Rumbaut, R. G. (2014). English Plus: Exploring the Socioeconomic Benefits of Bilingualism in Southern California (SSRN Scholarly Paper ID 2440950). Social Science Research Network.

² Feliciano, C. (2001). The Benefits of Biculturalism: Exposure to Immigrant Culture and Dropping out of School among Asian and Latino Youths. Social Science Quarterly, 82(4), 865–879.

³ Callahan, R. M. (2009). Latino Language-Minority College Going: Adolescent Boys' Language Use and Girls' Social Integration. Bilingual Research Journal, 31(1–2), 175–200.

⁴ Porras, D., Ee, J., & Gándara, P. (2014). Employer preferences: Do bilingual applicants and employees experience an advantage? In R. Callahan & P. Gándara (Eds.), The bilingual advantage language, literacy and the US labor market. Multilingual Matters, 236–262.

⁵ Alladi, S., Bak, T. H., Duggirala, V., Surampudi, B., Shailaja, M., Shukla, A. K., Chaudhuri, J. R., & Kaul, S. (2013). Bilingualism delays age at onset of dementia, independent of education and immigration status. Neurology, 81(22), 1938.

2.2 Debunking myths

Bilingual children have a language delay

This myth probably arises because it feels to parents like their bilingual child is delayed in their vocabulary and sentence production compared to monolingual peers. While bilingual children may know fewer words in a certain language than a monolingual, science suggests that their overall vocabularies are comparable in size if you count them across the two languages⁶. While it is true that a rather small proportion of young children do have difficulties with language, it's important to keep in mind that **bilingualism is never the cause of that**. A language delay has nothing to do with how many languages a child speaks. If your bilingual child has been diagnosed with a language or speech delay, you can rest assured that raising them in two languages will not do them any harm or worsen the delay⁷.

Children get confused by hearing more than one language

Bilingual children are not confused by acquiring two languages at the same time. In fact, regular exposure to two languages from birth is the 'easiest' road to bilingual success (although there are many possible paths that work perfectly fine). Bilingual children can differentiate between the languages they hear already in infancy. From the age of four or five, they start to develop a level of **metalinguistic awareness**, which means that they are conscious of their two languages and they can reflect upon their language use. When their parents each speak a different language to them, they will soon be able to tell the difference and even reply in the language they are being spoken to (that is, if they have learned to speak that language). Try as you may, you will not find any signs of language confusion.⁸

⁶ Rephrased from an interview with Casey Lew-Williams (see *Contributors*)

⁷ Rephrased from an interview with Mary-Pat O'Malley (see *Contributors*)

⁸ Guiberson Mark. (2013). Bilingual Myth-Busters Series Language Confusion in Bilingual Children. *Perspectives on Communication Disorders and Sciences in Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CLD) Populations*, 20(1), 5–14. (page 6)

Children will automatically pick up the languages the parents speak

While it is true that young children learn a great deal by listening and observing, it would be misleading to say that they automatically acquire any language they hear at home. The process of language learning is a complex combination of beneficial factors. Getting **varied and regular exposure** to a language is one important thing, but the best way to learn it is to practise as much as you can and have **meaningful, real-life interactions**.

“

Knowing that there is a need for you to speak a language, like communicating with a community, family abroad or with your parents, is an extremely effective motivation for language learning.⁹

”

Bilinguals should not mix their languages

One of the most widespread misconceptions about bilingualism is the idea that it is bad for children’s language development when they use both languages in one sentence or utterance. Many people incorrectly see children’s **‘language mixing’** (using two languages in one utterance) as a sign of confusion. Much to the contrary, this is rather a display of ingenuity and a **normal evolution** in bilingual development. It’s been proven that a bilingual child’s languages develop independently from one another, and that children can differentiate between them from a very early age¹⁰. When your toddler mixes languages, you will notice that the sentences remain correct: they follow the structure of the core language. When a bilingual child uses a German word in an otherwise English sentence, he will make sure that it fits into the structure of that sentence (*Mummy, can I have a piece of Kuchen?*). This proves that although bilinguals sometimes combine two languages,

⁹ Rephrased from an interview with Casey Lew-Williams (see *Contributors*)

¹⁰ Guiberson Mark. (2013). Bilingual Myth-Busters Series Language Confusion in Bilingual Children. *Perspectives on Communication Disorders and Sciences in Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CLD) Populations*, 20(1), 5–14. (page 6)

their brain can tell them apart. In fact, this language mixing is a natural and normal evolution. It shows how **resourceful** your child is. If they don't know a word in one language, their brain goes into problem-solving mode and provides it in the other. As your child's vocabulary develops in both languages, the mixing will disappear eventually. What remains is **code-switching**, which refers to bilingual speakers alternating between multiple languages in one conversation.

Bilingualism is detrimental to school success

It's possible that your child's school or teachers have limited knowledge of bilingualism and therefore don't know how to deal with a child that speaks a minority language at home. They're worried that the child will lag behind in school subjects because it doesn't master the majority language and cannot follow in class. While this may be a genuine concern, it has proven to be untrue. Some schools incorrectly advise parents to speak the majority language at home or forbid bilingual children to use their home language on school grounds. Unfortunately, the value of the home language for a child's emotional wellbeing is often overseen in situations like this. It's an important part of their heritage and emotional development. Furthermore, bilingualism is associated with cognitive benefits like stronger multitasking skills, creativity and working memory, which can **benefit children's school performances** in several subjects. On top of that, skills in the home language can be transferred to new languages and strengthen your child's understanding of language in general¹¹. So, there is plenty of proof that maintaining and supporting the home language can give your child more than an advantage at school.

¹¹ Ibid. (page 9)



Being bilingual means being fully and equally fluent in two languages

This is a very unfortunate misconception, because it puts a great deal of pressure on parents who raise bilingual children. Many feel that they have only succeeded when their child is equally fluent in all their languages. The idea that you're not a 'proper' bilingual until you're perfectly proficient in both languages is limiting and it does injustice to your valuable bilingual skills. **Bilingualism comes in all shapes and sizes.** Some bilinguals understand both languages and speak only one, others can speak two but only ever use one. Some have an accent in one of their languages, others know more words in one than in the other or can only write in one of their languages. It's important to keep in mind that **two languages are never acquired in the exact same circumstances.** We can learn them at different stages in our lives, in different places, we use them in different communities and for different purposes. Consequently, it's only natural that bilingual children's language skills are not all at the same level. Only a minority of bilinguals are perfectly and equally proficient in their two languages. Remember,

“

your child is a full-on bilingual as soon as they use two or more languages in their everyday life. It doesn't matter in what context or with whom they use them or exactly how competent they are. Language learning is a journey without a fixed destination. People learn new words at all ages and never cease to expand their language knowledge. Embrace your child's bilingualism and be proud of what you have achieved and the invaluable gift you have given your child.

”

After childhood it's no longer possible to become a fluent bilingual

Here's a beautiful message for every parent who wants to raise a bilingual child: it's never too late. Many people believe that there's a point of no return around the end of childhood, after which it's no longer realistic to become fluent or native-like in a second language, but millions of people around the world are living proof that this is untrue. The way you learn a language may be different depending on your age, though. Infants do have an advantage as their brains develop very rapidly and they acquire language in a seemingly effortless and natural way, whereas for a teenager it might require some more effort and active practising. But always remember that it can be done at any age, and any language skill your child gains is worth the while.

3

Who should speak what when - choosing the family language strategy

3.1 How to choose the right strategy

Once you have decided that you want to raise your child to speak your language, the next step is to make a plan for how to achieve this. As with anything in life, to achieve a goal, you first need to define it. Which languages do you want your child to speak and at what fluency level? Once you've set those goals, think about the resources you have in order to achieve them. Who can speak what language in the family? How much time can each language speaker spend with the child? The answers to those questions will help you to choose the best family language strategy.

The aim of the family language strategy is to **maximise the exposure** to each of the languages you want your child to learn. To estimate the level of exposure your child will get in each language, take into account all situations where your child will have the opportunity to hear and use a language. Grandparents, as well as other relatives and friends, can be valuable additional sources of language exposure. If there's more than one home language (i.e. a language different from the school language), you need to look for the best **balance** in the level of exposure to them.

Below, you will find the descriptions of the most commonly used **family language strategies** and when to use them. Remember that if your child's language environment changes, for example due to a move to another country, starting school in a different language, family separation or other reasons, you should review your choice of strategy. Does it still offer the optimal language exposure for your child?

Once you have decided on a strategy, let other important people in your child's life know and, if necessary, explain your plan. Whenever possible, involve them. The more people who support and help you in maintaining the strategy you chose, the better. Should anyone question your choices, read the [How to positively deal with resistance](#) chapter for ideas on how to handle these situations.

The strategies are **guidelines** for your family language setup. It is important that the strategy feels comfortable for your family. Don't hesitate to change your approach if it does not feel right or you do not see the results you want. Also remember that while a certain consistency is neces-

sary, don't be too rigid in your approach. The strategies can, and indeed should, be tailored to your child's language needs. As a rule of thumb, the need for consistency in language use increases if the amount of exposure to the language decreases. The less exposure to a language, the more consistent the speakers of it should be, to make sure that there are enough opportunities for the child to hear and use it, and to become a confident speaker of it.

3.2 Common strategies

One Person – One Language

The **One Person One Language (OPOL)** strategy means that the parents or caregivers each speak a different language with the child. Ideally, each person will select the language they are most comfortable with, especially in conveying feelings, and talk only this language with the child in one-on-one situations.

If the parents speak two different *minority* languages to the child, and each parent understands and speaks the partner's language (to a certain level of fluency), they can decide to use one of their minority languages as family language.

Parents who opt for OPOL often use a third language between them. This is not a problem for new parents during the first months of their child's life, but in family situations, it is advisable to decide what language to use as a family language. If parents don't understand each other's language, they can make an effort to learn their partner's language alongside their child. In such situations, they should agree to translate for each other when necessary. Alternatively, parents can opt to speak a third language between them and use it in family situations, combining the OPOL with the Time and Place strategy (see below).

Minority Language at Home

With the **minority Language at Home (mL@H)** strategy, both parents speak the same minority language at home. In this scenario, there is a clear separation of home language and school (or majority) language and the *minority* language becomes the family language in all situations, one-on-one and when all the family is together.

If one of the parents speaks the majority language, but is also comfortable speaking the minority language, parents can, instead of OPOL, agree to apply the *mL@H* strategy to support the minority language to offer the child more exposure in it. This strategy has been proven to be the most successful in maintaining minority languages at home.¹²

Time and Place

The **Time and Place (T&P)** strategy focuses on an agreed schedule where the parents (and children) will decide to speak different languages, depending either on the *time* or the *place*, or both. This strategy can be combined with the OPOL or mL@H strategies, when there are more than two languages in the family.

This strategy is suitable for:

- parents who speak multiple languages themselves and want their children to learn them;
- parents who are separated for various reasons and one parent wants to foster also the partners' language with the child;
- single parents who want to speak more than one language with their children;
- parents who want to introduce an additional language later.

When Time is the deciding factor, parents can:

- use one language during the day and another in the evening;
- split the languages between weekdays and weekends;
- speak different languages during alternating weeks, fortnights or months.

¹² De Houwer, A. (2003). Trilingual input and children's language use in trilingual families in Flanders. In C. Hoffmann & J. Ytsma (Eds.). *Trilingualism in family, school and community*. Multilingual Matters. 118-135; Lanza, E. (2007). Multilingualism and the family, in P. Auer and Li Wei (Eds.). *Handbook of multilingualism and multilingual communication*. De Gruyter Mouton. 45-67.



When Place is the deciding factor, parents can:

- use one language inside the home and another outside (immersion schools are a variant of T&P)
- have rooms of the home dedicated to different languages
- separate the languages by regular activities at home and outside (to avoid missing out on specific vocabulary in the other language, it is good to swap these around from time to time)

Parents can also decide to switch to the other language in a given situation at home that occurs regularly, like during meal times or when reading with the child, or playing with the child, or with visitors. When parents introduce this strategy they want to make sure that the child understands the reason for the switch and agrees with it. When a child recognises the need to switch to another language, this strategy can be successful.

Two Parents – Two Languages

The **Two Parents Two Languages (2P2L)** strategy is usually adopted by parents who speak both languages and decide to each speak both of them with the children.

Many parents decide to start with the OPOL strategy, and add their other languages later. If done in a consistent and organised way, this strategy can lead to great success.

Switching from one language to the other is common in bilingual families. Especially when families speak three or more languages at home, it is inevitable when everyone is together.

Some families choose to discuss different matters in different languages, which can lead to children developing a *situational vocabulary* in each or some of the home languages. Other families decide to use a specific language while watching movies, reading books, doing sports etc., combining it with the *Time and Place* strategy. The language choice can depend on who else takes part in the discussion or activity.

Parents should be aware that if one of the home languages is the majority language and/or the school language, chances are that the minority languages will suffer. With this strategy, consistency in fostering the minority languages becomes even more important than for the other strategies, as parents will need to guarantee enough exposure to support the minority languages throughout the years and keep them as the preferred languages to speak in the family.

3.3 Bilingual siblings

Choosing a family language strategy when you only have one child is in most cases fairly straight-forward. **With the arrival of a second child the family dynamics change, and sometimes it is necessary to adjust the**

strategy. You now have less one-to-one time with each child, so pay close attention to how much exposure each child gets to the family language(s). Differences in children’s ages and personalities can also mean that one child gets more attention than the other. A shy child may need more encouragement to use the lesser spoken language(s). On the other hand, a common sibling language, which is not understood by other children, can make the bond between siblings even stronger – they have a “secret” language together. If the elder sibling attends school, she may opt to speak the school language with her little brother or sister. As much as parents would want to influence which language their children speak with each other, the choice is ultimately up to the children. Experience has shown that they make this choice independent of the strategy the parents use¹³. Trying to enforce which language children speak with each other may work for a while, but once out of earshot, they normally resort to what they feel comfortable with. What you can do is to establish as strong a routine as possible to speak your language with your children. You can also ask your elder child(ren) to help you with teaching your language to the baby. This way you are giving them an important role in maintaining the family language(s).



¹³ Barron-Hauwert, S. (2011). *Bilingual siblings. Language use in families*. Multilingual matters. (page 160)

3.4 Questions and answers

Question *We are having a baby girl soon and we have been reading up on how to raise her to become bilingual, learning both of our native languages. How do we offer balanced language exposure to our daughter? Do we have to make sure she gets 50% exposure to each of the languages at home?*

Answer *The amount of exposure needed depends on many factors. You may have come across statements claiming that to acquire a language a child must be exposed to it during at least a third of the waking time. While this is a good goal to have, there is to date no research to back this up. How well and quickly a child picks up a language is not only about time. The **quality of the exposure** is vital, and **interaction** crucial. This is why watching a TV programme alone in a language is nowhere near as effective as if the child does an activity and gets to talk with another person in the process.*

*When deciding on which family language strategy is best for you to maximise the exposure to each language your daughter is going to learn, you need to see **the whole picture**. Think of all the situations where she will hear, and later interact in, the languages she's picking up. If she will hear one of your languages also outside the home, for example when she's with her grandparents, with a childminder or in daycare, then that language needs less exposure at home. If you and your partner speak a third language together, then think about how much actual interaction in each of your languages there will be, and choose your strategy accordingly. In the home, the exposure emphasis should be on the language(s) not spoken at daycare, school, or in the wider community.*

Question *We have just moved to another country and want our small children to become bilingual. Should we switch to the majority language so that our children will learn it quicker? Or should only one of us switch to the majority language? We both know the language but are not fluent in it. We don't know any other native speakers of our language where we live now.*

Answer *There's no need to switch to your new majority language, especially if you are not fluent in it and you don't feel comfortable using it with your children. The purpose of language is to connect with our children, and it's important to use the language that feels most natural to you when communicating with your children, the language in which you can express nuances of language and subtle distinctions when it comes to emotions and humour, for example. Your home language needs solid support now that it's not the language of the wider community. How you do this depends on the age of your children. Phone or video calls with other speakers of the language can help, as can holidays, if that's an option. 'Reading' together using wordless picture books is a great way to build both your emotional connection and your child's home language.*

Question *I want my son to learn my language, but don't know how I should go about this. My wife speaks the majority language and understands my language fairly well but doesn't speak it. I feel a bit rude switching to my language in front of her. What should I do?*

Answer *Talk to your wife about your feelings of being rude when you switch to your language. How does she feel about this? Children don't confuse the languages and begin to separate them from very early on. They begin to hear at about 25 weeks of the pregnancy and when they're born, their ability to separate the languages is robust. So you won't confuse them by having a conversation where you use your home language and your wife responds in the majority language. That way you're developing both languages. You can continue to use your language, your wife can use her language, and as a couple, you will have a shared language too. That's fine. Remember that children are wired to acquiring languages and don't get confused.*

Question *My partner doesn't speak, nor understand, my language. He only speaks the majority language. However, we both want our children to learn my language, too. How can I pass on my language without shutting out my partner from our conversations? What if my partner feels left out? What if the children learn only my language and my partner will not understand them?*

Answer *It's important to discuss what suits your family situation, your work and family life. Your child has a unique relationship with each of you and speaking two languages will not interfere with this. Ensuring quality time with each parent individually is important for those relationships and for language development. You can use your language with your child in one-on-one situations, your partner can use his, and you will have a shared language too. It is positive that your partner supports you to help your child learn your language. Discuss how you can do this without your partner feeling left out. Maybe he can learn alongside your child? Open communication is important - he should tell you if he wants to understand something and you should be happy to translate whenever he needs it. You can have family conversations about the similarities and differences between the languages - depending on the age of your child, of course. This will build metalinguistic awareness, which is beneficial for language development and literacy in general.*

Question *My partner and I speak different native languages, and together we speak the majority language, as this is how we met. We do understand each other's languages fairly well. We want our children to learn both our languages, but also the majority language. Should we keep the majority language as the common language? If not, how can we communicate as a family?*

Answer *It's already helpful for your family that you and your partner understand each other's languages, as you won't encounter situations where one of you doesn't understand what the other one is saying to the children. Maybe you can agree that you both will improve your language skills in your partner's language in order to, one day, be able to support your partner in fostering that language with your child, should this be necessary. You can keep the majority language as the common language, for example when having meals together, spending time as a family, and speaking your respective languages with your children when you're one-on-one with them. As the majority language is very likely to become the most dominant language for your children, especially if they will be schooled in that language, you may want to introduce a strategy like **Time and Place**, where you decide moments and situations, as a family, to speak one of your native languages. This could be on the weekends or at certain moments of the day. It is important that before you decide what language to speak as a family, you set clear language goals about the level of fluency your children will need to reach, in what time frame etc. Will your children need to speak, or also read and write your languages, and by what stage would they need to reach that level of fluency, and for what reason? If you intend to move to one of your countries of origin in the foreseeable future, you may want to foster that language a bit more in order to guarantee your children a smoother transition.*

Question *We have a complicated family language setup. My partner and I have different native languages. We met abroad in a different country and the language of the country has been our common language ever since. We have recently moved with our children to a new country, which means that a fourth language is added to the mix. Who should speak what with whom to make sure the children learn and maintain at least our native languages and preferably also the language my partner and I speak together as well as the new majority language?*

Answer *You probably already have a family language strategy where you and your partner each speak your own languages with the children. When you are all together as a family, you speak the “common language” you were always used to speaking with your partner. Depending on the age of your children, they might understand it, or even speak it already. As for the new majority language, it is set to become their daycare or school language. As you recently moved, it would not be advisable to change anything in the language strategy that you already have in place in your family. Keeping the home languages as before will give you a sense of continuity and balance that you all might miss in other areas of life at the moment. You can expect that your children (and you) will need some time to adjust to the new majority language, and there can be moments where they find it difficult to speak that language or any other of your family languages. This is part of the adjustment phase. You can help your children maintain the family languages while learning the majority language, by increasing the conversation time together. Transition is not the best moment to increase our expectations regarding the languages we speak at home. It’s more important to keep the communication going. Share your experiences, foster all your languages, while also exploring the new language every now and then. It’s not realistic to expect that all will go smoothly and that your children will attain a balanced fluency in all their languages within a short space of time. Give yourself a year (or more) to adapt, to learn the new language and to find ways to foster all your languages at home, and outside of your home. You may want to find support in your home languages from school, the broader community you live in and extended family.*

Question *I grew up with two languages and have as an adult become fluent in my monolingual husband's language, too. I would like our children to learn both of my native languages. Is it possible for one parent to pass on two languages?*

Answer *It is possible for one parent to pass on two languages to a child, yes, but you should always ask what language the child needs to be able to speak. If the answer is both, in order to speak with extended family for example, then you can find ways to pass on both languages. It is advisable to start with one language per person (following the **OPOL strategy**: your partner speaks his language and you speak one of yours) and add the other language later or by using the **Time & Place strategy**. We suggest you choose the language you spontaneously express your emotions with, the one that is the most dominant one for you at the moment or the one you feel most comfortable with. It should be the language you know nursery rhymes or children's songs in, and the one you would feel comfortable reading books to your child in. Choose the one that will take you less effort to spontaneously use with a young child. You would speak this language with your child when you are in one-on-one situations. You can foster the second language through singing and reading, and start with dedicating more time to it later on. It's important to put the needs of your child first and adapt the strategy to the situation.*



4

Your child's bilingual journey

4.1 Before your baby is born

What is happening?

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“The first language lessons are in the womb”

- Andrea Bader-Rusch

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Babies are cute and may look helpless, but they're way smarter than we think. Their brains and language skills have been developing since before they were born. Some parents-to-be talk to, or play music for, their unborn child to make the baby familiar with those sounds. This is not a myth, **even before birth, babies can hear and process speech**. Researchers have shown that communicating with your unborn child stimulates their language acquisition. Even in the womb, babies can recognise the sound of their parents speaking, especially their mother. They're able to hear you from about 25 weeks of pregnancy and soon start to learn speech patterns, rhythms and intonations¹⁴ from hearing mummy talk. They like hearing those sounds, it slows down their heart rate and calms them. Interestingly, this effect is stronger when the mother speaks her **native language** than when she speaks a foreign language¹⁵. That's a good start for your bilingual family - your baby is a fan of your native language even before it's born! If you have decided to raise your child in two or more languages, it's definitely worth speaking those languages to them while they are still in the womb – both mummy and daddy! Plus it helps you to feel comfortable in those languages as parents, if you aren't used to speaking them at home.

¹⁴ Chamberlain, D. B. (1999). Life in the womb: Dangers and opportunities. *Journal of Prenatal and Perinatal Psychology and Health*, 14(1-2), 31-43. (page 36)

¹⁵ Tokuhama-Espinosa, T. (Ed.). (2003). *The multilingual mind: Issues discussed by, for, and about people living with many languages*. Greenwood Publishing Group. (page 104)

Advice

- Think about your child’s communicative needs. What languages will they need to speak, read and write?
- Plan and agree on a family language strategy that you will follow once the baby is born. Who will speak what language to the child, when, and why? Discuss this with your partner and make sure you are on the same page. In [this chapter](#), you will find everything you need to know to choose the strategy that works best for your family.
- If you haven’t spoken your native language for a while but want to speak it with your child, you might need to **brush up on your native language skills**. Follow YouTube channels in your language about topics you like, watch movies and shows on TV to acquaint yourself with the current slang. If you get the chance, **immerse yourself** in the language also through reading, singing songs in the language, re-learn some nursery rhymes, ask friends or family about what children’s books they would recommend. Maybe they can send you some to read out loud even before the child is born. It might feel awkward at the beginning, but it will make it easier for you to speak to your baby in the first months.



Activities

- **Speak to your bump!** From 25 weeks of pregnancy, your child can hear you and will listen to the sounds you make.
- Listen to **music** in your language (and/or your partner's) and sing along.



culture & heritage box

Remember that language and culture are closely intertwined. Brush up on your knowledge about your cultural heritage - the stories, legends, poems and songs.

Questions & answers

Question *We are expecting our first baby soon and everyone tells me I should speak my native language with the baby instead of the one I speak with my husband and in the community. But I don't know if I have got it in me. I don't speak my language perfectly; what if I fail and our child doesn't learn my language properly?*

Answer *The feeling of losing your first language is real. You may initially have difficulty using it again, but it should be feasible to manage the simple language that parents typically use when they talk to babies or young children. This can be a nice opportunity for you to maintain your native language and brush up on it. Read simple stories to your child. Talk to them with a language use that feels comfortable to you and you will feel that it gets better after a while. However, as children get older and develop more linguistic expectations, it might not be enough for them to speak this language with only one person. Then it's a good idea to involve other people who they can talk to in that language (grandparents, cousins, etc.)¹⁶*

Question *I don't feel that my language is that important where I live now. What difference will it make to my children's lives if they learn to speak it or not. We will never move back to my home country. Their lives are here now. Why should I bother?*

Answer *Regardless of whether your native language has a high or important status in your country of residence, it's recommended for children to have access to their parents' languages. Grown-ups or teenagers often regret not having learned their parents' languages¹⁷. They want to explore that part of their identity¹⁸. Language is not only about communication, it's also about the culture it represents. Knowing the language will give them access to learning about the culture, which is an important part of their identity.*

¹⁶ Interview with Una Cunningham (see *Contributors*)

¹⁷ Nakamura, J. (2020). Language regrets: Mixed-ethnic children's lost opportunity for minority language acquisition in Japan. *Multilingua*, 39(2), 213–237.

¹⁸ Interview with Una Cunningham (see *Contributors*)

Question *I'm expecting our first child. I have lived away from my native country for many years. I can still speak my native language, but I no longer feel fluent in it as I haven't spoken it on a daily basis. I haven't kept up with the latest vocabulary and sometimes struggle to know the right phrases to use. I want to speak it with our baby, but is it the wrong thing to do? How can I prepare for the arrival of the little one?*

Answer *You mention that you want to speak it with your baby, so it surely is the right thing for you to do. You can prepare for the arrival of the little one by speaking the language as much as possible, making sure you get confident and comfortable in speaking it again. For ideas on how to do this, check our advice in the section above.*

4.2 Zero to 18 months

What is happening?

From hearing to listening to speaking

Young babies are masters in the art of observing. They pay attention to the rhythm and structure of language and start identifying patterns soon after birth. At a few months of age, children can **differentiate between**

two languages, because they're sensitive to the differences in sound patterns. Amazingly, they use not only their ears, but also their eyes for this. From about six months, babies are fascinated by faces. They're able to distinguish between languages by following the lip movements^{19 20} of the person who is speaking.

In their first year of life, infants gradually learn to **recognise words**. Since adults string all the words together into a natural flow, you might wonder how the baby knows where a word begins and where it ends. And in two different languages on top of that! Well, although it's a complicated cognitive process, it unfolds naturally. As children get more and more input in each language, they start to understand and remember words they have heard before. And we know that they can tell the difference between the languages they hear, so that is not an issue. Have you noticed that adults often use a typical singsong voice or '**baby talk**' when they speak to babies? This actually serves an important purpose: the exaggerated intonation helps babies break up the stream of language into smaller chunks²¹, which makes it easier for them to know where individual words begin and end. The easiest words are the ones they often hear in isolation, like *daddy* or *hello*. It's no coincidence that these are often the first words they say.



¹⁹ De Houwer, A. (2009). *An Introduction to Bilingual Development*. Multilingual Matters.

²⁰ [Hearing Bilingual: How Babies Tell Languages Apart](#)

²¹ [Baby talk helps infants learn language](#)

While babies learn to understand many words, and even phrases, during their first year of life, not much sensible talk comes out of them yet. They haven't figured out how to produce language. They do practise by **trying out all sorts of sounds**, like cooing, gurgling and babbling. Infants gradually discover how their voices and mouths work.²² Most babies have started to babble in repeated syllables, like *da da da* or *ma ma ma* by their first birthday. This is the final step toward the magical milestone of the first words. It's important to know that there's no universally agreed moment at which this happens, because there's such wide variation. The important thing is that at this stage of development, your child is able to listen to you and find ways of communicating with you. Children around this age also learn to understand the connection between objects and words and can point to objects you name for them. However, not all babies necessarily begin to speak both languages at the same time. Don't give up if your baby only uses words in one language to start with – bilingual children's languages rarely develop simultaneously, but they're likely to catch up!

Advice

- If you didn't speak to your baby in your own language during pregnancy, start from birth. Talk to your baby as much as you can! Immerse them in a home language bath.
- If you're used to speaking a language at home that is different from the one you now speak with your baby, try to be aware of how often you naturally switch to the language you are used to (when speaking to your partner, thinking out loud, etc.). If you notice that you're constantly switching between languages, define moments where you would rather stick to the one you speak with your baby and try to be consistent. Have a look at the chapter on [family language strategy](#) to find out how you can make consistent language choices.

²² De Houwer, A. (2009). Bilingual first language acquisition. *Multilingual Matters*.

Activities

- Whenever you're alone with your baby, **speak to them** as much as you can. Talk about activities, feelings, objects, and surroundings. Describe out loud what you're doing. You can do this during walks, while you bathe your baby, or when you go shopping. These daily rituals are a great and natural way for your child to learn words. A few examples: When you go shopping, say *I'll get you in the car, and then we'll go to the supermarket*, name the foods you're buying and the dish you want to make. When you bathe your baby, say *this is Bob the Duck or let's get a bar of soap and rub it over your belly*, naming the body parts as you go along. Acknowledge your baby's reactions and make eye contact with them while you talk to them.
- Sing **nursery rhymes** to your child. You can also do this during everyday rituals, like when you're putting your baby to bed, feeding them or bathing them. To make the rhymes more dynamic and interactive, accompany the singing with gestures, like clapping, waving, using finger puppets or acting out the words of the song. Vary the intonation and the volume, and see how your baby responds. Popular classics are 'Head, shoulders, knees and toes' or 'Incy, wincy, spider', but you can also create your own. Two or three sentences and you're good to go!
- Listen with your baby to **music in your language**. Newborns particularly appreciate the music they heard in the womb. It reassures and soothes them. Singing or dancing along can only make the activity more fun for both of you!
- Tell your baby all kinds of **stories or fairy tales**. Your one-month-old won't understand them (yet) but they'll love to lie curled up in your arms and listen to your voice. This is also a good way to familiarise your child with the intonations you use in your language. Once your child is able to focus their eyes on objects, you can use **picture books** to tell them short stories.
- From about six months, babies are **fascinated by faces**. Seize this opportunity to look at family pictures with them and introduce new words. Show them images of you, their grandparents or other relatives, and describe those persons and their faces.
- Your baby might have a go at saying words or naming objects, but only get as far as a single syllable (like *ew*, *bah*, or *goo*). If you know what your child is trying to articulate, pronounce the words clearly and repeat them in a meaningful sentence. For example, when your child sees a daisy outside and says *euw*, praise their attempt and say *look, a daisy. You've found a*

daisy! That is a beautiful daisy. Keep modelling the word in the following days and weeks.

“

Children need to hear a word many times and in different contexts before they are able to articulate it and use it actively.

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culture & heritage box

Look for traditional lullabies and rhymes from your culture. Sing and play them with your little one! If none come to mind, and the internet fails you, ask your parents or older relatives.

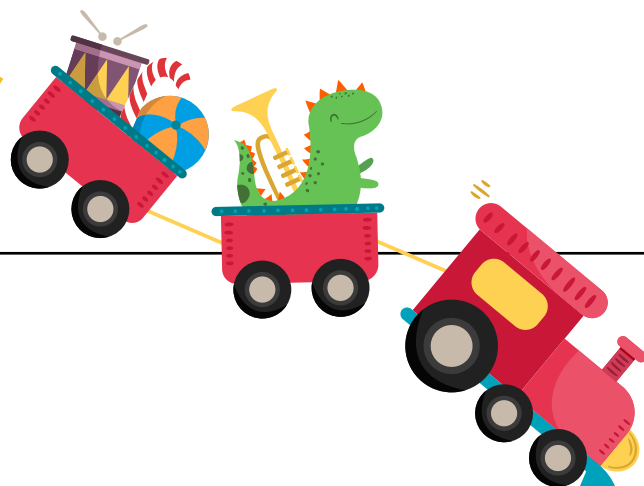
What if I start now?

This is the perfect time to start talking with your baby in your language. If, for whatever reason, you're not used to speaking your language, check out the activities in the previous chapter to make it a comfortable start. A little baby will not mind that you switch to a different language, so you can start talking your language whenever you feel ready. When the first words have started to appear around the one-year mark, do a more gradual switch to ease into the new language routine. Keep on showing your excitement at every new word, regardless of language. For further ideas on how to switch, see the [“What if I start now?”](#) part of the next chapter. Also read the [Who should speak what](#) chapter to decide on a common approach in your family.

Questions & answers

Question *We're the happy parents of our first baby. It's a big change for us, and everything is new. Since we're not fluent in each other's languages, we have always spoken English together. We want our baby to learn both languages, but it feels strange, too, for us to use our native languages since we've never done that in our home. How can we manage this without feeling odd, especially since we will effectively be holding monologues as it will be a while before our child responds in the language?*

Answer *Speak as much as you can! Talk to yourself, think out loud, express everything, talk more than you regularly would, provide as many contexts as possible for the child to hear the language. **Run a live commentary of your life.** It feels weird, but try not to be self-conscious.²³ The important thing is to get started. Once you do, it will get easier with time. It will also be helpful if you make a conscious effort to learn a bit more of each other's languages so you can follow what the other parent says to your baby. With a positive attitude to the other language and a willingness to learn you will soon notice that you understand more of that is being said*



²³ Interview with Annabelle Humanes (see Contributors)

4.3 18 to 24 months

What is happening?

From single words to short phrases

In the first 18 months of their lives, babies have gone from understanding words to actually producing them. They have set off on a fascinating journey and have babbled their way to the next step in developing their languages: **combining words into meaningful utterances**. In order to do that, they first have to expand their mental dictionary. From about 18 months onward, toddlers will say more and more single words. When they have collected enough, let's say about 50²⁴ words in total across their languages (not that you need to count them, a rough estimation will do), they gradually start to string words together into short phrases. By the age of two, they're able to make **2-3-word combinations**, like *dog eat* or *see car*. Don't worry about pronunciation - you may not understand half of what they're saying, but that's just a matter of time.

Depending on the opportunities your child has to interact in their languages, **one language may develop at a different pace from the other**. It's perfectly possible that your child is using only one language at this stage - don't worry about that. The balance between the languages they speak can turn around thanks to a shift in the amount of exposure. Note that toddlers are already very sensitive to their parents' language choice²⁵. If daddy always speaks Spanish to them, it's likely that they will only say Spanish words to daddy (that is, if they already know words in Spanish). If daddy suddenly says something in mummy's language, they might react very strongly to that. The learning process can also vary within each language separately. Some children only babble by age two, while others are able to make themselves understood quite well and utter short sentences²⁶. Usually, this type of variation evens itself out naturally.

²⁴ Making the Leap from Words to Phrases...: Tips for Helping Your Toddler Learn to Combine Words

²⁵ De Houwer, A. (2009). *An Introduction to Bilingual Development*. Multilingual Matters.

²⁶ Idem.

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Comparing your child with others the same age, no matter in how many languages they're being raised, does not give any indication of their individual development. Each family is so different on so many levels. Focus on the progress your child is making and rejoice at their incredible journey!

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Advice

- Your child is acquiring new vocabulary at a faster pace now. Make sure that you provide the necessary input and stimuli to foster your home language(s) and help them learn new words.
- If your child starts attending daycare and does not know the language used there, they will be in an unfamiliar environment where they don't understand what other people are saying. To ease your child into the situation and make them feel more comfortable, it's good to introduce them to a few important words in the majority language. However, this is merely to ease the transition - it's important that the home language does not lose ground. **The focus must remain on the home language.**²⁷
- When dropping your child off at daycare, you will probably see other children their age, monolingual or bilingual. Resist the urge to compare their language development with that of other children, as every child is different on so many levels.
- It's possible that your child starts to babble or say words in the language they hear at daycare. Don't worry, **it's a normal development** and it doesn't mean that they will only speak the daycare language from now on. A child's dominant language can change quickly, depending on variations in the amount of input they get. Just keep speaking your language and provide **consistent input and practice in the home language**. You can try to consolidate your home language by making your child feel that

²⁷ Interview with Annick De Houwer (see *Contributors*)

it's something unique that you share with them and that you're proud of²⁸, or by playing with puppets or stuffed animals who only 'speak' the home language²⁹.



Activities

- If your child says words in the language they hear at daycare, show your excitement for the new word, then repeat it in the home language. This way, you help them make associations and teach them new vocabulary in your language.
- Keep on **describing your activities out loud**. *We will read a story together, then we'll eat an apple.* At this age, children are able to anticipate situations, so they will understand the action that is coming.
- Simple but oh so valuable: read **children's books** with your children. They won't be able to read the words, but they will love looking at the pictures. Make it **interactive** by saying things like *What can you see?* or

²⁸ Interview with Monica Granström (see *Contributors*)

²⁹ Interview with Annabelle Humanes (see *Contributors*)

Where's the rabbit?. You can use picture books as well, naming, describing and pointing at the objects in the pictures: *This is a dog. The dog says woof!* Once your child knows a few of the words, you can play '**search and find**': name an object and ask them to point at the right image: *Where's the dog? Woof!* Memorising words requires time and repetition, so be prepared to read the same books over and over again. Children never get tired of their favourite books anyway!

- Print images and cut them into four pieces to create **mini-puzzles** (see PEaCH resource 1). Ask your child to assemble the puzzles and make the pictures whole again. While they're playing, you can repeat the names of the objects to help them memorise them.
- Play **memory games**. Print a few identical pairs of images (see PEaCH resource 2) and arrange them face down on a table. Turn one image face up, and ask your child to find the identical one. Repeat the words while you're playing: *That's a book! Where's the other book? Oh, that's not a book - it's a cat. Let's find the book first. Yes, there it is! You've found the book!* and so on.
- A great opportunity for your child to learn thematic vocabulary is to involve them in **household activities**, like cooking, doing the laundry or working in the garden. Have your kid watch you and give them **small tasks**, like holding something or handing you a tool, while you name things in different ways (counting, categorising, and so on). For example: *Now we're going to set the table. We need three forks. One, two, three. One fork for you, one fork for me, and one fork for mummy. Now let's put them on the table.*
- **Play ball** to practise counting. Count every time you throw or kick the ball.
- **Drawings and colouring** are good opportunities to enrich your child's vocabulary. Describe the parts they're colouring in and name the colours.
- Encourage your child to do a **role play** about what they experienced during the day or at daycare. You can involve siblings and use toys or dolls. Help your child find the words in your language.
- Play **hide and seek**. At this age, children begin to understand that objects continue to exist even if they don't see them. Your child will understand

longer sentences like *Where are you? Are you behind the sofa, behind the curtain, under the table?* This way, they learn short words or word forms that indicate **location** (under, behind, on, in front of) and words related to furniture and the interior of the house.

culture & heritage box



Select a doll or other figure which you give a typical name for your culture. If possible, dress it in traditional clothing. Involve the toy when playing with your child and make sure it always speaks your language. When you are cooking together, occasionally make something tasty which represents your culture.

What if I start now?

Your child has started saying some words and short sentences. You haven't spoken your native language with your child from the start because you perhaps continued using either the language you speak with your partner or the language you use the most. Can you still change to speaking your native language? Yes you can. It will, of course, be a big adjustment for both you and your child. You will have to get used to speaking a different language to them and they will have to get used to hearing it. Make it a gentle change. You have built a relationship in the first language and a sudden switch could lead to a negative reaction from your child. Make it a gradual process. Start with everyday situations where it's obvious from the context what is being said. This could be at the breakfast table or when putting clothes on. Sing familiar songs in your language. Keep it fun. Then introduce different situations in your language. One way to add another "speaker" is to have toys that only speak your language, hand puppets are ideal for this purpose.³⁰ Throughout the switch, accept what your child says in the other language, don't pretend not to understand. Instead, in your answer, give the words your child needed. For example, *Oh, you want to wear the blue top? Where's the blue top? I like the blue top, too!*

³⁰ Interview with Annabelle Humanes (see *Contributors*)

Questions & answers

Question *My son attends daycare and speaks some words in the majority language, but is not saying words in our home languages. What am I doing wrong?*

Answer *Every child develops language at their own pace. You mention that your son is saying some words in the daycare language. This is a good sign that he is becoming verbal. If he is not uttering recognisable words in one or both of your home language(s) (yet), give him some time and model what you expect him to answer. As long as you keep on speaking and reading with your son and involve him in conversations that trigger some kind of reactions in him, you're doing everything right. By using the words he already knows in the daycare language in your home language too, you can help him bridge the gap between the daycare and the home languages. Avoid putting too much pressure on your child (and yourself) and have patience.*



4.4 18 to 24 months

What is happening?

Conversation and story-telling

By age two, many children can combine words into simple 2- or 3-word sentences in their strongest language. From age two or two and a half onwards, kids may start adding more words to their sentences and say things like *dog eat food* or *mummy go shop now*. At this point you should be able to understand them and have **simple conversations**, where you ask them questions like *where are your shoes?* or have them carry out a simple request³¹. In their third and fourth year of life, your toddler's brain further explores the challenge that is grammar. They are now able to say longer and **more complicated sentences**, using clauses. *Mummy, I ate a banana that was rotten, or we went to the shop and got pencils for daddy* are the kind of sentences you may hear them say between the ages of three and four. Soon they'll be able to tell you the most imaginative stories about their crazy adventures!

Interestingly, the languages a bilingual child speaks develop independently from one another. This means that your toddler will structure their sentences according to the 'rules' of the language they are speaking³². They may use words from both languages in one sentence, but even then, their sentences remain correct. Children's spontaneous **language mixing** is normal and nothing to worry about. The unintentional mixing will soon turn into occasional conscious use of more than one language when speaking to other bilinguals who know the same languages. This is called **code-switching**. If a bilingual child uses a German word in an otherwise Italian sentence, they'll make sure that it fits into the structure of that sentence. This proves that although they are combining two languages, their brain can tell them apart. It shows how resourceful your child is: if they don't know a word in one language, their brain goes into problem-solving mode and provides it in the other!

In this phase of their lives, some children are ready to attend **preschool**. For kids who have only heard minority languages at home, this is a big change. All of a sudden they are submerged into a **new language**, and

³¹ Language Development Milestones: Ages 1 to 4

³² De Houwer, A. (2009). An Introduction to Bilingual Development. *Multilingual Matters*.



on top of that they don't hear the home language as much as they used to. The good news is that it's fairly easy for young children to learn a new language – and there's no limit to how many languages they can learn. It might take them a while to adjust, but they will soon catch up in the majority language. **Continuous support in the home language** is important to maintain the balance in language input.

Many kids around this age become more interested in visual representations and start to draw more consistently. Even before starting school, some kids might start showing an interest in **letters and numbers**. Most children learn to recognise letters between the age of 3 and 4 – this often begins with the letters of their name. That doesn't mean they understand the connection between a letter and a sound though³³. In most countries, school starts around the age of six. By that time, children have reached the cognitive ability to associate letters with words and meaning. If your child enjoys playing with letters at an earlier age, please play along, but don't expect your little one to learn them.

³³ FAQ: Your Reading Child

Advice

- If your child says something to you in the preschool or daycare language and you want to stimulate them to speak in the home language, there are several **strategies** you can use. It's important to acknowledge what your child says, whichever language they are speaking. Pretending you don't understand them is not a good approach. It interrupts the communication flow, and it does injustice to the amazing skill they have of knowing one word in two different languages. Furthermore, you would be teaching your child how to be untruthful to your child if you claimed not to understand when you actually do. Show them that you understood while encouraging them to switch to the home language (*Yes, that is a fork! And what does mummy call it?*). Another option is to repeat what they said in the home language while keeping the conversation going (*J'ai pris le bus – Ah, you took the bus. What time?*)
- One way of introducing your child to the school or daycare language is to hire a **babysitter** who speaks that language. That way, you don't take too much exposure time from the home language (at least if you don't hire the babysitter every night) but your child will become familiar with the sound of the majority language and even learn a few words in it so that they won't be completely overwhelmed when they start daycare or preschool.
- Explain your chosen family language strategy to the staff at your child's preschool or nursery, so that they are aware of what languages your child is learning.

Activities

*Many of the activities from the previous age brackets can be **adapted** at a later stage to suit your child's age, abilities and interests. In addition to some **new activity ideas** for kids between two and four years, you'll find examples below on how to alter the **previous activities** so that they are fun and helpful for your child.*

Adapted activities

- Play ‘search and find’ with images or picture books that are more complex and have more elements in them.
- Involve your child in more challenging, age-appropriate chores around the house, like storing the groceries, gardening, emptying the letter box, helping you cook, and so on. Keep on discussing and describing these activities with your child.
- When your child is playing with model toys, ask more complex questions. In addition to fostering your child’s basic vocabulary by naming objects, colours and characteristics, also encourage your child to develop sentences. You can do this by stimulating them to make up stories or prompting them to explain what they are doing and why they are doing something a certain way. Examples:
 - What are you building?
 - What are you going to do next?
 - Why did you pick the red colour?
 - So a princess lives in your castle? What happens to her?

New activities

- If your child attends **daycare** in the majority language, ask the daycare workers about the words they have learned there, and try to include that vocabulary in your use of the home language. Read books about the same topics or ask your child to explain in the home language what they did and learned at daycare.
- Display your child’s drawings (hang them on the fridge, for example) and invite them to describe them to other family members and friends in the home language.
- Children this age are a big fan of **pretend games**: playing doctor, having tea parties, playing restaurant, and so on. This is a great opportunity for

them to practise the home language - they are stimulated to think about how to formulate and express their ideas. Give them the opportunity to interact and keep the conversation going by playing a role in the game, asking questions or having siblings join them.

- If and how much screen time a child is allowed, is a pedagogical choice for parents to make. **TV shows, films or video games** in the home language can be a valuable source of language input (if the language use is age-appropriate). However, this input will not be very effective for language learning unless it is accompanied by some form of **interaction**. Stimulate your child to produce language. If you're watching a children's show with them in the home language, discuss it with them. Ask them to explain what it is about, how they think the story will evolve, talk about what the characters may be thinking, and so on.
- Print a **drawing of an open house** with all its rooms (see PEaCH resource 3) and put it on a table. Print images of household objects and furniture (see PEaCH resource 4 and 5) and cut them out. Play a game with your child where they have to put all the objects in the right rooms. Ask them why they think a certain item belongs in a certain room, and ask them to specify where exactly in the room they want to put it. This way, your child will internalise the vocabulary and learn to use notions of space: *in* the bathroom, *next* to the cupboard, *behind* the table, and so on. Try to make it a varied conversation by asking different questions, like *Do we have this in our house? What can you use that for? or What colour is that?*

culture & heritage box



Incorporate your native culture into the activities. If you remember games from your childhood that were typical of the culture you grew up in, play them with your child. Find books that were originally written in your language. For memory games, choose images of items that are typical of your culture, like clothing, food, toys, instruments, buildings and so on.

What if I start now?

Good news – **yes, you can start speaking your native language with your child**, if you didn't do so already. As there can be big differences between how well children speak within this age bracket, you should adapt your approach accordingly. In the “[What if I start now?](#)” section of the previous chapter you will find advice on how to begin. At this age, making it fun is even more important to keep your child motivated to learn. Look for situations where there is a real need for your child to speak your language. This can be a relative or friend who does not speak the other language. If you can find a group of other children who speak your language, they may be your child's best motivators at this point. If you allow screen time, you can watch children's programmes or cartoons together. Choose those with clear and simple language and interact with your child to help with the understanding. If your child is not used to hearing you speak your language at all, be prepared for some initial reluctance to go along with the change. If this happens, try to find out the underlying reason and adapt your approach. You know your child best, so think of something exciting, then find a way to incorporate your language into an activity around it. This could be going to the zoo, being creative with playdough, or any other activity that involves using your language.

Questions & answers

Question *My son is quickly picking up the majority language as he has been at daycare and school since the age of one. He knows a lot of words in my language as well but uses them very rarely. How can I encourage him to use my language more?*

Answer *The first weeks and months of preschool are crucial for maintaining the home languages. Try to find ways to maximise the use of the home language. It may well be that after a few weeks of full-time preschool your child comes home and speaks to you in the school language - it's not easy to switch to the home language.³⁴ There are multiple reasons for your son not to respond in the expected language. He might still be adapting to the school language and wants to use it also at home, or he is tired and prefers to speak the language he used during the day. You can help him make the transition between school and home language(s) by involving him in an activity and conversation, like preparing a snack, dinner or setting up a game in your home language. Engage him in a longer conversation that involves a few turn-takings, and ask open questions (e.g. What did you play with your friends today?). If he doesn't switch to your language after a few turns, model what you expect him to say, but avoid asking him to repeat and don't point out mistakes. However, always acknowledge and appreciate all the languages your child speaks.*



³⁴ Interview with Annick De Houwer (see Contributors)

4.5 Four to six years

What is happening?

From age four onwards, children have normally acquired enough language knowledge to **express themselves clearly**. They may still mispronounce certain sounds or words (*paghetti* is a classic example), but generally they are able to make themselves understood not only to their parents but to people outside the family as well. Between the ages of four and six, kids learn to string sentences together into fairly **coherent speech** and start to explore the art of storytelling. This is a wonderful skill as it means that, apart from being very entertaining, children are able to think and talk about more than the present reality. They can refer to the past and the future, express their imagination and understand abstract concepts such as time or love.

Another concept that children learn to understand around this age is... language itself! Your child has reached a level of **cognitive maturity** which allows them to think about, and reflect upon, language. This is called **metalinguistic awareness**. Your bilingual child is now aware that they know more than one language, that they can switch between those languages and that other people may or may not understand either of them. Bilingual children are especially good at managing the use of their languages according to social situations³⁵. When someone addresses them in one of the languages they speak, they will likely respond in that language, as long as they feel confident and competent enough in it. Some bilingual children already do this automatically at an earlier age, but it's only now that they start to be conscious about their own language use and the control they have over it. This metalinguistic awareness can also do wonders for the communication between parents and their kids. If your child only speaks one of their languages, now is the time to talk to them about it and try to find out what the reason is.

At this stage of development, kids learn to associate sounds with letters and make sense of the **alphabet**. Although formal reading instruction won't start until primary school, most kids are already **discovering the written world** to some extent, being surrounded by magazines, leaf-

³⁵ Nicoladis, E. & Genesee, F. (1997). Language development in preschool bilingual children. *Journal of Speech-Language Pathology and Audiology*, 21. 258-270.



lets, food packaging or grocery lists in the home.³⁶ Since these materials are authentic and contextualised, they can help make a child familiar with written language and link concepts to words. If those materials are available in both the minority and the majority language, bilingual kids may start to identify differences and similarities between the forms of both languages. These initial experiences or **emergent literacy skills** are a valuable preparation for children's further literacy development at school. Be mindful, though, that some children are more verbal than others. Where certain kids make huge progress in language development at this age, other kids might do well in other domains, like fine motor skills or body movement. Don't worry about this and remember the mantra to **not compare your child to other children.**

As children get older, attend preschool and experience more and more social situations, the **influence of the majority language will grow.** For many young children it takes only a few months until they start to say words or even sentences in the school language. When they come home after an entire day of preschool, it may be hard for them to switch back to the home language. Fortunately, your child is now old enough to engage in conversations about the languages used at home, so you can talk to them about switching to the home language.

³⁶ Wang, X. L. (2011). *Learning to read and write in the multilingual family*. Multilingual matters. (page 64)

You will notice that part of the advice and activities below are about literacy (reading and/or writing) in the home language. The PEaCH handbook divides literacy skills across three age brackets: exploring emergent literacy skills from 4 to 6, learning to read from 6 to 9, and learning to write from 9 to 12. This doesn't mean that you have to strictly follow the age indications, though. You know your child better than we do. The best approach is always to go with their interests and abilities, and to let them define the pace.

The advice and activities below, for fostering emergent literacy skills, are low-threshold suggestions to have a look at if your child is eager to explore the written language.

Advice

- When your child is in preschool, **talk to the teacher** about your home languages. Explain that your child speaks one or more different languages at home. Say that you want to support them in learning the school language, but that it's also very important to you that your child speaks and improves in your home language(s) too. Ask about ways in which the teacher or school could support your child's home languages. Are there opportunities for you to talk about your home language and culture at school or in the classroom? That way, your child can share this important part of their identity with their classmates. You can introduce them to typical foods, music, traditions and words in your language, have them draw the flag, and so on. It's valuable for your child to experience and talk about your culture in a way that is not restricted to your home.
- When children are schooled in a language other than their home language, they tend to prefer speaking the school language at home. In order to **foster the home language**, you should keep on speaking it with your child. If they don't respond in the expected language, you can use two strategies:
 - a) **model the response** you expect, and repeat words that your child needs to form sentences in the expected language,

b) **express a guess** about what your child wanted to say: *So what you say is that you want to eat pasta with tomato sauce?* **Avoid correcting** your child (*no, speak French*) or pretending that you don't understand them, as this would interrupt the communication flow and imply that your child is making a “mistake”, which is not the case.

- If your child makes attempts to write, **encourage them to experiment**. Don't get bogged down in the details and praise their attempts. It doesn't matter if they are scribbles or pictures; your child's fine motor skills might not be sufficiently developed to write. At this stage, the importance lies in discovering the principles of writing, the concept of print and the functions of written communication³⁷. You can let them read to you what they wrote, or have them help you with the shopping list if they are eager to write.
- As mentioned in ‘What is happening’ above, your child is developing **metalinguistic awareness**: they are starting to realise that there is more than one language in their life, that different people can speak different languages. You can now gradually engage in metalinguistic conversations with your child and explicitly talk about the languages. To consolidate the use of the home language, you can say things like *Mummy speaks French and I speak Polish, in Daddy's language we call that... or What's that in French?*

Activities

*To further help your child develop language skills and vocabulary knowledge, you can consult the list of **general skills activities** below.*

*At the bottom, you'll find activities specifically aimed at fostering your child's **emerging literacy skills**. Remember that it's still early to actually start reading or writing. These activities are only meant for children who express an interest and you want to capitalise on that interest.*

*Also check the **culture & heritage box** for ideas how to integrate aspects of your native culture into the language activities.*

³⁷ Wang, X. L. (2011). *Learning to read and write in the multilingual family*. Multilingual matters. (page 65)

General skills

- Make it a habit to read with your child regularly and explore the stories to enhance their vocabulary and fluency in the home language. If your child is attending school or preschool in a different language, choose books with topics they are already learning about. This way, you **create a bridge** between the languages and help your child transfer knowledge from one to the other.
- Play **word games** or **search and find** games to help your child recognise and compare sounds. Tell them to name words that start with p or end with ar, and so on. An example is the game ‘I spy with my little eye’ where you can say *I spy with my little eye... something in the living room that starts with ‘t’.*
- The game ‘**I spy with my little eye**’ can also be used to help expand your child’s vocabulary. For this, you can focus on shapes, colours, materials and other characteristics of objects. Get creative! To increase competitiveness, play with a timer (one minute to identify as many objects as possible). For example, *I spy with my little eye... things in the kitchen that are round/blue/made of wood, etc*



- Play memory games (see PEaCH resource 2).
- **Categorising words** helps to memorise vocabulary. You can cut out images of products from supermarket flyers and have your child paste them on sheets per category (fruits, vegetables, dairy products). You can also gather toys or household objects and sort them into categories (animals, cars, pencils, building blocks, and so on).
- Play **mime games** to enhance your child's understanding of verbs. Make cards with verbs that express physical action (to swim, to dance, to wave, see PEaCH resource 6). Each player draws a card and has to act out the action. The team or player who guesses the most actions wins the game!
- **Expressing emotions** is one of the beautiful functions of language, and it's important that your child feels comfortable doing that in the home language. You can stimulate this by playing the **weather game**. Print out pictures of different weather conditions (see PEaCH resource 7). Point at a picture that matches your emotions and explain why, giving concrete examples (*I feel sunshine inside me because I'm happy, daddy bought me flowers today, or I feel clouds and rain because I broke my favourite teacup and it makes me sad*). Have your child follow your example and ask questions to guide them.
- Listen to **podcasts for children**. You can do this in the car, on the train or whenever you find yourself with a bit of time on your hands. Depending on your child's progress in the home language, you can talk about the content of the podcast.
- In order to practise thematic vocabulary and train your child's memory at the same time, you can play games like '**I'm going to the market and I'm buying**'. Make cards with food items on them (see PEaCH resource 8). The first player draws a card (with bananas, for example), puts it on the table and says *I'm going to the market and I'm buying bananas*. The second player draws a new card, repeats the previous one and adds the new item (*I'm going to the market and I'm buying bananas and cheese*). Each time, the players have to remember the whole list. For different levels of difficulty, you can either place the cards face-down or face-up. Cards with food items can also be used for more creative purposes. For example, you could ask your child to put together a dish!

Emergent literacy skills

- Once your child has learnt the alphabet at preschool or school, sing an **alphabet song** in your language that introduces the letters and that your child can sing with you, like *A, B, C, D, E, I'm in the jungle in a coconut tree*. This way, your child will learn how to pronounce the letters of the alphabet in your language.
- This activity implies that the school and home languages use the same alphabet, but this is not always the case. Three types of alphabets are used in EU languages: Roman, Greek or Cyrillic (see PEaCH resource 9). If the home alphabet is different from that of the school language and your child wants to explore it, you can start by showing them the home language alphabet a few times (using rhymes or songs). Then take five minutes a few times a week to make them write separate letters by connecting dots, or have them copy simple words. You can wait with this until your child has learned the school language alphabet, but if they show interest before that, you can start earlier.
- An important step in the development of literacy skills is to discover the functions and **purposes of literacy**. Deliberately create opportunities for your child to observe how the written home language is used in everyday context, and make sure there **are authentic materials** and prints for them to look at when they show an interest.³⁸ Watching you write something (a note, shopping list, letter, recipe, etc.) can spark your child's curiosity. Involve them in a conversation about what you're doing and point at what you're writing.
- If there is food packaging that has words in the home language on it (like breakfast cereal or a bottle of juice), read and pronounce them to your child while pointing at the words, to familiarise them with the written home language. If the language is not represented, you can glue or write it onto the packaging (write cereal on a cereal box). You can also label other household objects in the home language.³⁹
- Buy a set of **magnetic letters** and put together simple words with your child.

³⁸ Wang, X. L. (2011). *Learning to read and write in the multilingual family*. Multilingual matters. (page 73)

³⁹ Ibid. (page 66)



culture & heritage box

For your games, use more intricate pictures of items from your culture. Talk about what is special about them and how they may be different from what your child is used to.

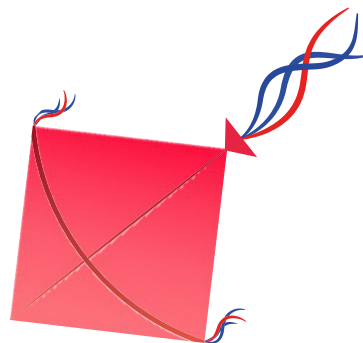
What if I start now?

If you have been speaking a different language with your child for about four or five years, can you introduce your native language now? **Absolutely!** Like any routine change, it will not be quick and you will need patience to stick with it. Reading the “What if I start now?” sections of the previous chapters will give you an insight into what approach you can take and how to start. At this age, the importance of friends grows, so whenever there is an opportunity for your child to socialise with children speaking your language, grab it! Equally, if you can, visit places where your language is spoken in the community. Being **immersed** in the language in different settings, e.g. media, shops, sports events, parties and so on, helps your child see the language as part of every day. It is no longer a language “only daddy speaks.” If you can find a fun weekend class in your language, you may consider giving this a try. Ask to attend the first classes yourself, too, to make sure they are suitable for your child, and that they don't undermine your own efforts by being too demanding or uninspiring.

Questions & answers

Question *Our daughter's strongest language is the majority language, which I also speak. She fully understands what I say to her in my language, but she has never answered me in it. She says it's too difficult for her. What can I do to boost her confidence in using my language?*

Answer *Your daughter knows that you speak the majority language, so there's no pressing need for her to speak your language with you. For a child it is natural to opt for the most economic, easiest solution. Try to create a need for her to speak your language, in a way that your daughter wants to speak it with you, and enjoys it, too. Show your appreciation at any attempt to speak your language. Don't correct mistakes she makes, but use a correct version yourself. You mention that she finds your language difficult. To make it more attractive to her, choose a topic that she likes and talk about it in your language. Find books that she enjoys and read them to her. Help her understand new words you come across. During conversations, you can then stimulate her to use these words in other contexts for her to become confident.*



4.6 Six to nine years

What is happening?

As they leave toddlerhood, kids continue to refine their speaking skills. Their vocabulary becomes richer and their sentences more complex. They have developed enough language awareness to approach language in an analytical way and understand it as a **system with rules and characteristics**. If your child speaks English, you'll notice that your child now knows that words usually need an 's' in plural, and that they're able to use the correct form of a verb in the past tense. This is an important change in your kid's language development. They no longer learn through imitation, but by detecting and **applying rules**, which opens a wide range of opportunities. The exceptions are still challenging, but fortunately, children this age develop increasingly effective memory strategies⁴⁰. Nothing better than grammatical exceptions to train your memory!

For bilingual children who go to school in the majority language, most of their days evolve around one language. They play with classmates, read and write, and learn about maths and other subjects in the **majority language**. Many parents worry that this dominance will cause their children to lose ground in the home language. While this is a real concern, there are ways to avoid this and to consolidate the home language. Have a look in the advice section for tips on how to tackle this.



⁴⁰ Wang, X. L. (2011). *Learning to read and write in the multilingual family*. Multilingual matters. (page 88)

Around age six, many children are ready to start school and learn to read and write. The emerging literacy skills many children acquire at home in early childhood, like making sense of the alphabet or linking sounds to letters ([see previous age bracket](#)), will now be further developed at school and gradually turned into **formal literacy skills**. The story for bilingual children can be a bit different. Children who have learnt a minority language at home might not be able to make this transformation in their home language, since many don't have the opportunity to get schooling in it. However, there are ways for parents to help their kids develop further reading and writing skills in the home language. It's important to realise that reading and writing skills are not as intuitive and natural as understanding and speaking; they don't rely on imitation and require a more systematic approach. Although reading and writing skills are interwoven and mutually reinforcing (children who read a lot become better writers, but practice in writing can also improve reading skills), we recommend you to **start with reading**, so as not to overwhelm your child.

*You will notice that a great deal of the advice and activities below are about **literacy** (reading and/or writing) in the home language. The PEaCH handbook splits literacy skills across three age brackets: exploring emergent literacy skills from 4 to 6, learning to read from 6 to 9, and learning to write from 9 to 12. This doesn't mean that you have to strictly follow the age indications, though. You know your child better than we do. The best approach is always to go with their interests and abilities, and to let them set the pace.*

*The advice and activities below focus on **reading skills**.*

*Also check the **culture & heritage box** for ideas how to integrate aspects of your native culture into the language activities.*

Advice

General advice

- At this age, children spend a lot of time at school, immersed in the school language. Friends become more important, and **social interactions** outside the home increase. In most, if not in all, of these new relationships your child is not using your language. This means that there is less exposure to the home language. For this reason, it is more important than ever that you stick to **speaking your language**.
- To help maintain the home language for your child, you may explore whether it would be feasible to speak less of the school language in the home. If you are not already doing so, could you switch to using the home language as the common language when you're together as a family? This may mean that you change the family language strategy you're using.
- Another important factor is to find **other speakers of the home language** who your child can interact with. If in-person contacts can't be arranged, try setting up online calls with other children who speak your language. Common interests can help to keep the chats flowing.
- There may be a change in which language children prefer to speak, especially when they come home from school. Often, they are still in school language mode. They think about what they have learnt and experienced in the school language. It's good to give children some time to make the switch and allow them to speak about their day in whatever language they prefer. Parents can still respond in the home language.
- Setting rules like *only home language at home* may work for some families. However, to avoid frustration caused by having to use a less comfortable language, it's better to let children process what they have experienced and learnt in the school language. By providing feedback in the home language and using the vocabulary the children need to speak about their day, parents can make the switch easier.

Advice about reading

- First of all, remember that you can set your own goal, and that goal can just as well be to not invest in literacy skills. Asking yourself the following questions will help to **get your goals straight** in your own mind:
 - What do I expect from this bilingual upbringing?
 - Is bilingual literacy a goal I want my child to achieve?
 - How far am I willing to go to help my child become biliterate?
 - Do I have the time to support my child to learn to read and write?
 - Is it enough for my child to be able to read simple texts like restaurant menus or road signs, or do I want them to read difficult academic texts in the home language?
 - Last but not least: what is feasible for my child, taking their preferences and abilities into account?
- Learning to read is a process in which reading challenges are added one after another (from basic to more complex syllables, words, sentences and texts). Keep the learning pace slow, **follow your child's rhythm** and don't rush towards the next level like a video game. To turn reading into a pleasurable and positive parent-child experience, allow your child to enjoy reading texts which become easy after a while. However, change the text after a few times keeping the same level of difficulty, otherwise your child might be reciting a text they now know off by heart.
- Keep in mind that it's not always necessary, or realistic for that matter, for parents to take up the role of teacher. The home is a different learning environment from school, and many parents may struggle to find time for literacy activities in between work, household chores, and parenting in general. If the time and energy you are investing in your child's home language literacy skills takes too much of a toll, select activities that are feasible for you and your child. Any progress is a valuable contribution and with few activities you can already accomplish a great deal.

“

Remember that literacy isn't a question of now or never. You can start working on it at any time.

”

- Most experts agree that it might be easier to wait until your child has acquired basic reading skills in the school language (alphabet, phonetics, etc.), so that they can draw on that experience. However, don't underestimate the power of interest as a motivator. If your child is eager to read in the home language at an earlier age, and **if you feel that they're ready, then just go for it**. Make sure that there are reading materials available at home, so that your child has access should they be interested. Whenever you decide to start, don't push your child if they're not ready.
- Try not to impose too many expectations on your child. Some kids can reach a high level of literacy in the home language at this age, while others might reach first-grade level and be rightly proud of that achievement. Just **praise every small step and be patient**.
- Let's be realistic - your child might not always be excited to work on these activities, and working on them all evening after a school day will be very tiring for your child. Children will also remember new information better when they practise it regularly.

“

Regularity and repetition are more important than quantity.

”

That's why it's better to divide the literacy activities into **small chunks** instead of working for hours on end. Reading in the home language for **5 to 10 minutes a few times a week** can be a realistic goal for both you and your child. Plan these activities before your child does things they like (such as watch cartoons or play outside) so that they are motivated to finish the activities.

Another important factor in keeping your child motivated is the **choice of reading materials**. You can show your child the usefulness of being able to read in the home language by providing materials that are **relata-**

ble and a part of **everyday life**, like restaurant menus, holiday messages, recipes or emails. Consider their hobbies and **interests** as well: choose an online article about a singer they like, coverage of a sports game they watched, a text about their favourite animal, etc.⁴¹

- **Talk to the teachers** at the beginning of the school year and explain to them that you are teaching your child to read in a different language. Tell them about your approach, what kind of reading activities you are doing and the progress you are making. They might be able to give you advice and, who knows, maybe they can provide valuable resources or materials. The teachers should also have an insight into your child's progress at school, and whether your child has any difficulties with reading in the school language that you should take into account.
- Especially for literacy, you could consider entering your child in a weekend class or community school, where reading or writing lessons are taught in their home language. Also check with the embassy of your native country if they organise language classes in your language.

Activities

General skills

- Play different **games** in your language (board games, card games, etc.) and stimulate your child to explore the language around it. Ask them to explain the rules, moderate the game and discuss their strategies (*First I want to... then I am going to... and after that...*) This can also help them practise new words, like *throwing a dice, moving pawns, stacking blocks, or taking turns*.
- Play **Don't say it**, a game where players take turns in describing words or objects without using certain 'forbidden' words. The other players have to guess the word that's being described. For example, describe *ball* without using the words *round* and *bouncy*. You can make it more difficult by adding game rules, like prohibiting words with certain letters or sounds in it. This game will help your child to expand their vocabulary and find

⁴¹ Wang, X. L. (2011). *Learning to read and write in the multilingual family*. Multilingual matters. (pages 90-96)

synonyms and alternative ways to describe something.

- When your child knows how letters and sounds are connected, you can play **Word Chain**, an oral game where one player starts with saying a word (e.g. *apple*) and the next person has to think of a word that starts with the last letter of the previous word (e.g. *elephant*). The next word in the chain has to start with a **t**, and so on. Be warned, children can keep this up for hours!
- Play a game where you ask your child to say something without showing their teeth, or moving their tongue. Challenge them by asking them to say longer words or sentences. The player who manages to stay serious the longest, wins. This is a fun way for your child to explore the **articulation of sounds**. You can vary by telling them to pronounce a word and leave out one or two letters (Example: *tell me where you live, without saying the letter A - I live in msterdm!*).
- Play a game where your child has to find words that finish with the same sound, e.g. *book, look, hook; safari, ugly*.



Literacy: reading skills

- Understanding how words are divided into syllables is the first step of learning to read. Once your child has learnt to identify syllables and read simple words at school, you can start doing similar exercises in the home language. Note that how words are divided into syllables and how letter combinations sound in the home language may be different from the school language. In the PEaCH collection of language materials, you can find lists of words that contain similar sounds (*far, father, safari*). Starting with words that sound similar will make it easier for your child to read the syllables and learn that different letter combinations can generate the same sound (like door and pour). Read the words with your child, beginning by pronouncing each syllable separately and then pronouncing the word as a whole. Using words is better than isolated syllables that don't mean anything in themselves. These lists are often coupled with exercises that invite children to **match the words with corresponding pictures**. The next step is exercises that **mix various syllables**, and when your child has got the hang of that, have them read simple sentences. See our [collection of language materials](#) for documents and exercises provided by teachers. For more materials, you can also check holiday workbooks or websites for home schooling in your language.
- Try **'shared reading'** with your child. This means that you read them a story or book, with a view to modelling fluent reading. Read the same books a few times, each time focusing on an extra aspect⁴². For example, on first reading, focus only on pleasure and comprehension. Next, point at letters and ask your child to sound them out. Then, point out how words are divided into syllables.
- To keep track of your child's literacy development in the school language, you can look for, and work with, similar reading materials in the home language to **match the school reading materials** (similar topics or genres). Concepts acquired in one language can help your child understand it in the other language. On top of that, the relevance to children's school knowledge may motivate them to read home language texts.⁴³
- If your child doesn't understand part of the text they are reading, here are a few **strategies** you can apply⁴⁴:

⁴² Wang, X. L. (2011). *Learning to read and write in the multilingual family*. Multilingual matters. (page 107)

⁴³ Ibid. (page 94)

⁴⁴ Ibid. (page 105)

- encourage them to look for information that may help clarify the text (e.g. picture clues)
 - re-read information that can help them understand the text (like previous sentences, the title, a summary,...)
 - help your child anticipate the content of the text based on prior knowledge about the topic
 - help your child reflect on the text by creating summaries about what they have read
-
- When your child is reading a book in the home language with you, pause from time to time to ask questions such as: *What do you think will happen now?* (then have them find out if their prediction was correct), *What did *character* do?*, *How did the story evolve?* or *What were the important characters and events in this chapter?* (to check their comprehension of the text) and *Did you like the story? Why (not)?* (to reflect on the reading experience). This way, your child actively engages in the story, which motivates them to read on⁴⁵.
 - Buy a set of **magnetic words** in the home language and involve your child in making up funny sentences.⁴⁶
 - Make reading an **integral part of your family experience**. Stimulate your child to use their home language reading skills to solve **real-life problems** (e.g. to look something up in the home language, etc.), write notes in the home language to put in your child's lunch box, etc.⁴⁷
 - Think about **games that involve reading**. Hide a treasure in the house and write down a description for the child to find it (e.g. *the candy is hidden underneath the red cushion on mummy's bed*), or write down instructions for a drawing that your child has to make (e.g. a blue house with two windows, a red door, a tree and a dog).⁴⁸
 - As soon as your child can read simple sentences in the home language, they could read them out loud to family members provided they feel comfortable doing so. Showing their skills to others and getting praise for this can boost their confidence.

⁴⁵ Ibid. (pages 106-107)

⁴⁶ Ibid. (page 116)

⁴⁷ Ibid. (page 76)

⁴⁸ Jaspaert, K. & Frijns, C. (2017). *Taal leren*. Uitgeverij Lannoo. (page 115)



culture & heritage box

For your reading exercises, look for texts related to your culture: recipes for typical dishes and simple stories from your childhood. When your child can read more complex texts, look for descriptions of traditional customs from your heritage.

What if I start now?

Your child has grown up monolingually and now you wish you had passed on your language. Is it still possible for your school-aged child to pick it up? Yes, it is! **It is never too late to learn a language.** At this age, it's vital that you come to an agreement on how to start. Discuss why your language is important for you and the extended family. Always approach the discussion from your **child's point of view** and listen carefully to any objections and address them. Children are pragmatic, so be creative and find the “why” which will inspire your child to pick up your language. *Because I say so!* is not a good motivation. You may get your child to learn a little by being forceful, but such an atmosphere is not conducive to learning, nor is it sustainable in the long run. A school-aged child is used to formal tuition, so finding a tutor or classes to support your own efforts may work well. For many languages there are also online apps tailored to different ages. Previous “What if I start now?” sections will give you practical ideas on how to introduce your language at home. Adapt them to your child's age and interests. Encourage video calls with other speakers of your language. You can also agree on a schedule, for example using your language at meal-times, or on Sundays. Gradually increase the time. This way it should not become too overwhelming. Language immersion either through visits or group activities can give your child's language learning a real boost. Make the learning experience fun and rewarding by being encouraging and showing your appreciation. Patience and persistence are key.

Questions & answers

Question *My daughter is self-conscious about us speaking my native language when her school friends are around. I have always spoken my native language with her and it feels strange for me to switch languages. How can I handle this situation?*

Answer *There are several reasons for this behaviour which is very common among bilinguals. At this age, children are more conscious about social norms and your daughter might prefer adjusting her language to the situation that requires another language choice. If her friends who don't share your native language are with you, she doesn't want to exclude them from the conversation or make them feel awkward, or even think that you have something to hide. This is perfectly normal and you might do the same in certain situations. If you had to discuss something with your daughter and her teacher, you would not switch to your home language, because you want the teacher to understand what you're saying to your daughter. You want the conversation to flow and avoid misconceptions. When we use another language in a social setting people have the natural tendency of getting suspicious and feeling excluded.*

Of course you can speak your language with your daughter in your own home or when you're out and about, but when you meet friends or talk with other people who don't understand your language, you may want to consider using the language that allows a seamless conversation and make everyone feel comfortable. If switching languages is too difficult for you in your home, you can explain to her friends that using your native language with your daughter is what you naturally do at home, and ask them to not take it personally or feel free to ask if they want to know what you're talking about.

Furthermore, your daughter probably wants to feel and sound

Answer *like her friends. What peers do and how they talk will become increasingly important. Please talk about this with your daughter and ask her what situations she would feel comfortable to speak your native language when friends or other people are around. It is important to agree on situations where you use your native language with her and where you would switch to the majority language to make your daughter feel more comfortable and feel comfortable yourself. Using the majority language with family in specific social settings does not mean that your native language is less important, it's a conscious choice to adhere to social norms and shouldn't make anyone feel uncomfortable.*

Question *Our son has been subjected to nasty comments and bullying at school and he says it is because he speaks a different language. He says that he does not want to speak my native language anymore. This breaks my heart, and I don't know what to do. Any advice?*

Answer Please talk about this matter with the teachers and head-teacher to figure out the bullying part that is affecting your son. The reason why people react this way is usually because they don't understand the language, they feel judged or criticised, or they have misconceptions about it. To be judged and excluded for the languages we speak is a grave matter and should be taken seriously as it can have an impact on our sense of identity. Ask the teachers to raise this in class and in school, and to make clear that knowing other languages is an asset. Some schools organise days or activities where they welcome and include other languages at school. In schools which are more language inclusive, children with other native languages feel more welcome and there is less of this kind of bullying.

At this age, children want to belong to peer groups and fit in. Ask your broader language community – your extended family and friends – to show your son how important your native language is, and why it is worth being able to speak it and be proud of it. It is also essential that you make it clear to your son that your native language is your family language and that not speaking it with you would make you sad. You can have a serious conversation with your son about the benefits of speaking your native language, not only to speak with family and friends, but also to learn additional languages in the future. Focus on the advantages and fun aspects of speaking the language and let him decide what to do. Should your son choose to not speak your language with you for a while, allow him some time (a week or two) to reflect on the matter, but agree that you will continue speaking your language with him during this time.



4.7 Nine to twelve years

What is happening?

Children are now ready to use their combined language knowledge for holding forth about a particular topic, negotiating and forming opinions. At school, they continue to develop their reading and writing skills. They can now write sentences and read longer texts and books.

Since children learn about a wide range of topics at school, their vocabulary in the majority language may be more varied than in the home language, although they may know more words about household or family-related topics in the home language. The principle behind this is simple, **the more words they hear in either language, the more they remember.**

Your child has now reached the final stage before they hit **puberty**, and this may already begin to show. Typically, children in their early teens start to think about who they are and develop a set of **values and stronger social connections**. For bilingual children, language is an important part of their identity. Some kids are perfectly comfortable with their language situation, while others might have doubts and questions about it. In what language can I really be myself? What culture do I belong to? If your child switches to the majority language, it may not only be a question of input; it can also be a choice they make, to affiliate with their friends and classmates, to belong to a group or society. It can also work the other way around. Your child may develop a growing interest in your native culture, and a curiosity to discover the different parts of their identity. Check the advice section for tips on how to deal with your child's **growing sense of belonging and identity**.

Being able to write in the home language can make a child feel even more comfortable and at home in it. Even small, daily writing practices can contribute to that feeling, such as a shopping list, a letter, or a birthday card. Writing is an extra means for children to express themselves in their home language. It's important to know that **learning to write is easier in some**



languages than in others. In Finnish, for example, words are pronounced the same way they are written. In English on the other hand, there is a world of difference between written language and spoken language (like the word ‘island’). The similarity between the home and school languages (or lack thereof) also plays an important role. If they use the same alphabet, your child will be able to transfer writing skills that they have already acquired at school. When both languages belong to the same language family, like French and Spanish, your child can also transfer vocabulary and grammar knowledge. If the home and school languages bear few similarities, more explicit teaching of the alphabet and handwriting skills may be needed at home.

The good news is that all European languages have one important thing in common: they are all **synthetic languages**. This means that the words in a sentence influence each other. Their form changes, depending on other words. Take the sentence *my brother eats an apple*. If you put ‘brother’ in plural, the verb ‘eat’ will change as well (‘my brothers eat an apple’). So when children learn to write at school, they first learn to **recognise the types of words** (nouns, verbs, adjectives, etc.), and then they learn how the form of those word types can change (from singular to plural, from present to past tense, and so on).

*You will notice that a great deal of the advice and activities below are about **literacy** (reading and/or writing) in the home language. The PEaCH handbook divides literacy skills across **three age brackets**: exploring emergent literacy skills from 4 to 6, learning to read from 6 to 9, and learning to write from 9 to 12. This doesn't mean that you have to strictly follow the age indications, though. You know your child better than we do. The best approach is always to go with their interests and abilities, and to let them define the pace.*

*The advice and activities below focus on **writing skills**.*

*Also check the **culture & heritage box** for ideas how to integrate aspects of your native culture into the language activities.*

Advice

General advice

- If you're still actively working on the home language with your child, it's a good idea to take stock of the approach you have taken so far and ask yourself if an upgrade to a **more mature approach** is necessary. Many children, as they head into their teens, feel a growing **need for independence**. If you still want your child to do language activities at home, you may consider giving them that independence and allowing them to decide what they want to watch or read or play, and how they want to maintain their home language skills.
- It's possible that your child becomes more conscious about being bilingual. The teenage years are looming, and for many children at this age it becomes increasingly important to fit in and belong to social groups. Being bilingual may be something that sets your child apart, and while that is a wonderful thing, it can make them feel different. Some children might feel like they have to choose between their languages and their cultures in order to establish an identity.

“

Whatever choices your child makes, remember that their ability to affiliate with more than one culture is an incredibly enriching gift. And try not to worry, the connection with parents and family is stronger than a language choice. Making your child feel that they are accepted and understood is the best motivation for them to keep valuing and respecting your native language and culture.

”

Advice about writing

- Learning to write is a **systematic process** that requires considerable cognitive effort. Here are a few things you can take into account to strike the right balance, keep things feasible and not overload your child and yourself.
 - Same as for reading, ask yourself how far you want to go and what your expectations are. The efforts required depend on the **goals you want to reach**. Do you want your child to be able to write informal notes and simple sentences, or complex, longer texts? Importantly, what does your child want? If they are reluctant to learn, you can explain to them how vital it is to you that they know how to write in your language, or try to reach a compromise. Remember, though, that it's not a good idea to force them if they're really not interested. It's also perfectly fine to decide not to teach your child to write in your language, if neither you nor they have that ambition.
 - It's best to start with writing activities when your child can **read** comfortably in the home language. Follow your child's rhythm. If writing in the school language is challenging for them, it's advisable to wait a while before you teach them to write in the home language. Same as with reading, learning to write is not a *now or never* process. It's perfectly fine to choose a moment in life that suits you and your child better.
 - Think about your child's writing needs and whether or how you can fulfil those needs. Writing should be **meaningful and relevant** in a child's everyday life, not only a potential asset for their professional

career. Are there real-life opportunities for your child to write (letters to family, a diary, exchanging notes in the house, etc.)? If not, the learning process might feel artificial to them.

“

Just like with speaking, authentic communication is the best motivation for children to write.⁴⁹

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- If you decide to give it a try, know that it's good to give your child the **freedom to experiment**. Rather than looking for perfection, children will benefit most from natural and fun writing opportunities that allow them to make mistakes⁵⁰. Exercise patience. Your child still has lots of other things to learn at school, so this is going to be a long process. If you want fast progress and results, language courses are more advisable.



⁴⁹ Wang, X. L. (2011). *Learning to read and write in the multilingual family*. Multilingual matters.

⁵⁰ Ibid. (pages 112-113)

- **Talk to the teachers** at the beginning of every school year and explain to them that you are teaching your child to write in a different language. Tell them about your approach, what kind of writing activities you are doing and about the progress you're making. They might be able to give you advice and, who knows, maybe they can provide valuable resources or materials. The teachers will also have an insight into your child's progress at school, and whether your child has any difficulties with writing in the school language that you should take into account.
- While grammar doesn't have the reputation of being the world's favourite subject, understanding the system of a language is vital for learning to write. If you plan on teaching your child to write in your language, it's a good idea to **brush up on your grammar knowledge**. In order to be able to write correct sentences, it's important to know what the different parts of speech are (nouns, verbs, adjectives, etc.) and how they are linked. See the PEaCH collection of online resources that can help you with this. You can also ask the teacher if your child has learned about this at school and if there are examples that you can transfer from the school language to the home language.
- Especially for literacy, you could consider entering your child in a weekend class or community school, where reading or writing lessons are taught in their home language. Also check with the embassy of your native country if they organise language classes in your language.

Activities

General skills

- People keep expanding their vocabulary their entire lifetime, so for children of this age there's definitely still enough to learn! **Word games** are timeless and always fun. You can play them anywhere and at any time, and you can upgrade them to any level you want. For example, think of a random word or find one in a dictionary, and ask your child to form compounds with it. If you choose car, possible compounds can be *carseat*,

cable-*car*, *car* wash, or even *scarf*.

- Explore **multi-meaning words** in your language, like *orange*, which can be a fruit or a colour, or *glasses*, which can be spectacles or something to drink from. In game-mode, the player who comes up with most multi-meaning words wins.
- When your child feels comfortable spelling words in your language, you can play the **word chain game** (see [previous age bracket](#)). Make new rules with extra challenges, like finding words that start with the second or third letter of the previous word. If the word is 'broom', the next word would have to start with 'r'. You can allow the players to use a dictionary if needed.
- Play a game where you ask your child to form sentences where all nouns and verbs start with the same letter, such as *Anna ate apples* or *Ben broke the bed*. You can also choose to focus on names, dishes or cities that have to start with the same letter: *I'm Mary, I like mushrooms and I live in Manchester*.

Literacy: writing skills

- Wait until your child understands parts of speech in the school language and is able to identify them, before you introduce the **parts of speech** in the home language. This might take a lot of time. In fact, for many children, it takes at least a year to master this at school. However, there's an advantage in waiting. Your child's fine motor skills will be more developed. Between the age of nine and 12, writing has become a physical exercise that requires less motoric effort than for beginners, so that's one less obstacle to negotiate!
- To familiarise your child with the parts of speech, it's best to observe these in **simple, real-life sentences** (like sentences from a book they like). You can start with **nouns and verbs**, since these often express an object or an action, which is concrete and tangible for a child. If applicable in your language, ask your child to find singular nouns in basic sentences, then ask them to point at plural nouns (*So chair is singular because it's only one*

chair. Do you see a word in plural, that talks about more than one thing?). Help them find out how the words change from singular to plural (*What is different between this singular word and this plural word? Is there an extra letter?*). Then ask them to find other plural nouns with the same change patterns. Once they get the hang of this, help them discover plural patterns for other types of nouns. Let your child find the patterns through observation. This is much more dynamic than you explaining the theory and your child listening. When you've done this, transform the passive skills into active skills with small exercises, like pointing at an object and asking your child for the plural. You'll also find activities in the PEaCH [collection of language materials](#), or in holiday workbooks.

- Next up are verbs. Ask your child to point at the verb in a sentence in the present tense, and repeat this exercise until they can identify them relatively easily. Don't worry if this takes quite some time. Once they're able to identify verbs, ask them if, when and how the verbs change. Let them find out the forms of similar verbs, then move to other types of verbs (if there are different types in your language). Once they're able to do this, you can do the same for other parts of speech.
- To practise parts of speech in general, you can point at a word in a sentence and ask your child which type of word it is (for example, point at the word *beautiful* in the sentence *that is a beautiful picture* - this is more advanced). It's important to repeat this exercise in increasing intervals: first close together, then further apart. For example, practise one part of speech for two days in a row, then leave a few days in between, then a week, then two weeks, and so on. This will help your child to **consolidate what they have learned**. Like for reading, regularity is key. Analysing parts of speech for five to ten minutes a day, a few times a week, is enough.
- Only focus on the basic parts of speech, and **skip the more complex ones** for the time being (adverbs, conjunctions, connectives, etc.). Nouns, verbs, adjectives, pronouns and articles (depending on the parts of speech used in your language) are enough. Your child doesn't necessarily need to learn the names of the parts of speech in the home language; they can use the terms they learned in the school language if that makes it easier (providing they have the same meaning in the home language).
- Once your child is familiar with one part of speech (like nouns), you can

already do writing activities for that part, while introducing the other types of speech. **Mixing different types of activities** or exercises will keep things interesting and varied for your child.

- To practise actual writing, it's best to **start with single words**, but make sure the words are **embedded in sentences** so that there is context. Having your child copy isolated words is not advisable, because they don't mean anything. An example exercise is to ask your child to complete a sentence where one word is missing. Initially, you could download or provide a **theory sheet** which explains the rules of conjugating verbs, or how to form plural nouns, depending on the part of speech you want to work on. Your child can refer to this sheet during the first exercises. Once this goes well, they can try it without the theory. It's important to deal with **one aspect of writing at a time** and give your child enough time to become confident. Starting with writing full sentences might overwhelm your child, because they have to overcome several difficulties at the same time. Keep the exercises playful where possible. Online exercises are often more attractive than working on paper. On the PEaCH website, you'll find activities, exercises and theory sheets provided by teachers, to practise writing.
- Once your child has practised enough with single words, you can start working with **simple sentences**. Provide real writing opportunities in the home language, e.g. text messages, an email to a friend, a letter to grandparents, invitations to birthday parties, notes to family members, captions in the family photo album, etc. Make writing an integral part of your family experience⁵¹. To keep your child motivated, make sure that the writing activities are in step with your child's ability, and be there to help when necessary.
- In addition to traditional exercises, you can also try **language-experience exercises**⁵². This means that your child tells a story, and you write it down to use for further activities (like reading, writing or spelling). Discuss with your child what you want to write about and brainstorm about the content. Then write down the story your child describes, using their words. Afterwards, read the text with your child, go over specific elements and ask questions (about word choice, spelling, parts of speech, etc.). To make this work, try to write the text in a way that doesn't exceed your child's current knowledge about language. For example, don't ask them to tell a story about the previous weekend, if that means using the past tense while they're still learning how to write in the present tense. That's

⁵¹ Wang, X. L. (2011). *Learning to read and write in the multilingual family*. Multilingual matters. (page 116)

⁵² Ibid. (pages 110-111)

the advantage of traditional workbook exercises - they are tailor-made to match your child's level. If you do a language-experience activity, make sure your child's story doesn't contain things they haven't learnt yet.

culture & heritage box



Together with your child investigate and discuss typical traditions from your culture and compare how different holidays are celebrated. Incorporate texts about these in your writing exercises. If possible, time your visits so that your child can have a genuine real-life experience of them.

What if I start now?

You have a pre-teenager and realise that you would really want them to be able to speak your language. Can this dream of yours become reality? Yes it can! It is important, however, that this is a **shared dream**. It is not enough for you to want this; your child will have to want it, too. For this reason, before you think about practical ways to start, you should come to an agreement with them that you will do this together. Speaking about how useful or possibly financially lucrative it will be in the future may not be that relevant. Talk about the ability to connect with extended family and other aspects that align with your child's current interests. Carefully consider their opinion and ask what they think could work. What would be fun for them? Speaking with you at home, learning through doing something with others, spending time immersed in the language with relatives, self-study, online or in-person classes? Maybe they would prefer to start by reading something simple but interesting with your help or using a dictionary? Try different approaches and don't be afraid to change direction if something does not work. At this age, if available, your child may benefit from formal teaching in addition to learning the language with you. Keep in mind that this will take time, and your child will need your **encouragement and support** throughout. Be patient and sensitive while they're learning. Never ask them to show off their skills to others

and allow them to progress on their own. Be careful not to set the expectations too high. Don't assume that they will soon be able to have deep conversations in your language. Always appreciate the efforts they are putting in and remember that any additional knowledge in your language is a bonus.



Questions & answers

Question *When he was younger, my son always answered me in my language. After starting school this slowly changed so that he now only uses the school language at home. I only speak my native language with him, and I know he can still speak it, as he does so with my parents when they visit. However, I notice that his speaking skills are deteriorating. How can I turn this around so that he can maintain his fluency in my language?*

Answer *Speaking a language is like any other skill. The less you practise it, the less spontaneous it becomes. However, just like any other skill, it can also be revived to its former level. At this age, on the cusp of being teenagers, children often become more self-conscious and prefer staying in their comfort zones. If your son lacks confidence in his ability to speak your language, then he will choose to speak the school language, as he knows you understand it. For a child of any age, **there should be a need and a want to learn and maintain a language.** Think about all the situations where you wish your son would use your language. In how many of them is there a real need for him to speak it? If the language is necessary for him only during grandparents' visits, then try to think of some other situations where a similar need could be created. For example, could he spend some holiday time with relatives or friends in your native country? Spending time immersed in the language is known to be an excellent way to revive and maintain a language. Could he do online calls with other speakers of the language? If he knows how to read, make sure that you have interesting books and magazines at home in your language. Note that there should be both the need and the want for him. Whatever you decide, make it a joint decision. It's important that your son agrees with your plan.*





5

**How to
positively
deal with
resistance
from others**

You're excited about raising your child to become a bilingual (and so are we!), but like with any decisions in life, you may encounter people who disagree with your choice. If your child is with you in such a situation, remember to be a good role model and speak up for your language and heritage. If it is not possible or safe to do so, explain to your child afterwards why the person was wrong. Here are some tips to help you deal with nay-sayers.

5.1 5 tips

1 Know your stuff

Inform yourself about bilingualism to feel confident that you're doing what is right for your family. (Reading this book, you're well on your way for this one!) Being aware of the facts and myths about bilingualism, you can then counter doubters for example with *research shows that being bilingual doesn't cause language problems. I can send you some papers if you like.*

2 Remember that there is usually a positive intention

You want what is best for your child. Keeping this in mind will help you keep calm in any situation where your decision to raise a bilingual child is questioned. For example, your partner may be concerned that there will be a communication problem in the family, or the grandparents worry that they will not be able to speak to their grandchild. An uninformed professional can genuinely think that dropping a language is the best solution. Luckily you know better having read this guide!

3 Keep your response to the bare minimum

If you feel overwhelmed or it is not necessary for you to react to the other person's comment, you can remain silent. Note that some cultures don't cope well with silence, so be mindful. If appropriate, you could say 'huh' - a minimal response which means you have taken your turn in the conversation. Or, you could thank them for their opinion and then move the conversation on to something else.

4 If a discussion is necessary, ask for more information, share your perspective and facts

Show genuine interest to find out what is behind the person's opinion. Ask questions and clarifications. Acknowledge the other person's concerns. Look for a common ground. Then keep the focus on your perspective which helps diffuse conflict while remaining true to the validity of your viewpoint. Read the [Benefits and Myths](#) chapters and share relevant information with the other person

5 Look for another professional

If you're dealing with a professional (doctor, public health nurse, speech and language therapist) and conclude that you cannot work with this person, look for someone else or see if you can get a recommendation from a friend for a multilingual-friendly professional.

5.2 Questions and answers

Question *My partner does not like me speaking my native language with our child. He thinks that the language will be no use to our son, and that I should only speak the majority language with him. I want our son to learn my native language – what can I do?*

Answer *It is a tricky situation when your partner does not appreciate your native language or does not want it in your home. This issue entails much more than the language itself. It has to do with the values we attach to languages and how we use them in our families. Every language is useful. Knowing the language of his cultural background is valuable for the development of your son's identity. It allows him to connect with the extended family and will no doubt prove beneficial in his working career, too. This is also a relationship issue. The most important thing is that you talk to each other about this. Find out the reasons why your partner is opposed to you speaking your native language with your son. Try to convince your partner that this is important to you and that your partner should respect this wish. Chances are that your partner is afraid of being left out when you're speaking your native language to your son. If this is the issue, there are several things that you can do: You can help your partner to become acquainted with the language (by teaching a few basic expressions or even suggesting classes). You can make a compromise and only speak to your son in your native language when your partner is not around. You can also agree to translate when necessary and your partner should agree to ask whenever a translation is needed.⁵³*

⁵³ Interview with Una Cunningham (see Contributors)

Question *My **parents-in-law** don't want us to raise our children to be bilingual. They're worried that they will not be able to communicate with them if our children learn my language first. They think it's better to stick to one language only.*

Answer *The first step is to talk to them about it and try to explain to them that just because your children can speak your language, does not mean in any way that there will not be room for your partner's native language. You can tell them that it is scientifically proven that children can learn two languages from a young age without any problems, and that the majority language is at no risk whatsoever – the child will have plenty of time to learn it at school, and with the grandparents. If they're on board, here's some advice for the grandparents who speak the majority language: They can play an important role in boosting the child's confidence when it comes to the minority language, in signalling that it's valuable. The grandparents can make positive comments about the child's language skills in the minority language, explicitly praising and admiring them for being bilingual. They can even learn a greeting or basic expression in the child's minority language. This way, they also show their acceptance of the minority language which is vital for the parents.⁵⁴*

⁵⁴ Interview with Una Cunningham (see Contributors)

Question *My **child's teacher** told us not to speak our native language with our son at home. The teacher said that it is detrimental to his school language learning and that it's a disadvantage to his academic success. Should we switch to speaking the school language only at home?*

Answer *The teacher's opinion is not based on facts. Current research is crystal clear on this. Speaking two or more languages does not interfere with language development. Children who have a solid foundation in their home language do better at learning to read in other languages, and better academically overall, than children who speak only one language. It's better to support the home language so your child can transfer the skills he has acquired to the school language.*

Question *Our **doctor** told us to speak only one language with our daughter and not to confuse her by introducing another language until she's fully fluent in her first language. We were planning to both speak our native languages with her and neither of us wants to drop our language. What should we do?*

Answer *Your doctor is not an expert on early bilingualism and does not have sufficient knowledge about it. In this case, don't take your doctor's word for it. Children can have speech-related issues, but the problem is never bilingualism. There is a common, but false, belief that taking away one language will make room for the other to get better. This is not true. It is like comparing tennis and badminton. You will not become a better badminton player if you stop playing tennis.⁵⁵*

Question *Our son has been diagnosed with a DLD (Developmental Language Disorder) and our **speech and language therapist (SLT)** told us to stick to only one language when speaking with him. He has been bilingual since he started talking – is this the right advice for us?*

Answer *This advice goes against the best practice recommendations from professional bodies across the globe. If your son needs to speak two languages to participate fully in all contexts of his life, then that is what he should be supported to do. A diagnosis of DLD does not change that. Children who have DLD struggle with language, but this does not mean that they must use only one language. Your SLT needs to work with you to identify speech, language, and communication goals that will facilitate your son's participation in all aspects of his life in all his languages. The SLT does not need to be able to understand or speak your languages to do this, but the SLT should find out about the speech sounds and grammar of the different languages in order to get a clear picture on the challenges that your son is experiencing.⁵⁶*

⁵⁵ Interview with Annick De Houwer (see Contributors)

⁵⁶ Interview with Mary-Pat O'Malley (see Contributors)

Question *Other people often give us a funny look when we speak our home language when we're out and about. Sometimes they whisper behind our backs (often so we can hear it). We have even been told that we should only speak the majority language since we live in this country. Although this does not sit right with us, we have been thinking that it might be better for our children if we did not speak our language in public at all. Should we speak our language at home only?*

Answer *This situation is about what feels right for both parent and child. If people criticise you in public for speaking another language, this is narrow-minded behaviour. They're reacting to an audible expression of your ethnicity. Assess the seriousness of what is happening, if these people can cause a dangerous situation, you may want to switch your language or be as discreet as possible, until you're out of hearing range. In safe situations, just carry on speaking your language as you normally do.⁵⁷*

⁵⁷ Interview with Una Cunningham (see Contributors)



6

Children who are late talkers

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The reason why we are including a chapter on late talking is that many parents have questions about this topic. Bilingualism does not cause language confusion or delay, but this does not mean that bilingual children are immune to language development issues. It is important for you and every parent to know what to do and when to contact a professional if you are worried about your child's language development. Just like with any health-related symptoms, it is better to ask for advice earlier rather than later. If everything is fine you can stop worrying, and if some intervention is needed, it is good to start it early.

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When you read about children's language development, you will come across terms like *language delay* and *language disorders* or *developmental language disorder*. *Delay* generally means that children catch up with their non-language delayed peers. The word *disorder* suggests something more persistent and impactful on everyday life and performance at school. The focus of this chapter is mainly on **language delay**, that is children who are later or slower to talk, also called **late talkers**.



Children who are late talkers may have delays in their speaking only (for example, not using many single words or not combining words). Or they may have delays in both speaking and understanding of language (mixed delay).

The most likely outcome for late talkers is that they will catch up with their typically developing peers. They may need help from a **Speech and Language Therapist (SLT)** to do this. SLTs can assess children's speech, language and communication from well before 12 months of age.

6.1 A few important things to keep in mind

- #1** Speaking two or more languages does not cause language delays or disorders, not even temporarily. **If your child has a problem with language, it's not because they are bilingual.** Your child's language development depends on the amount and quality of input they get in each language, and the opportunities they have to use their languages.
- #2** Being multilingual does not make speech and language problems worse. Children who are on the autism spectrum or have Down syndrome can, and indeed do, become multilingual. If your family needs two or more languages to establish and maintain relationships through communication, then that is what they need.
- #3** Never follow the advice to drop a language in the belief that it will simplify things. There is no scientific evidence that supports this advice.
- #4** The vast majority of children all over the world develop their languages without any major difficulties. Depending on who you ask, the number of monolingual children with speech and language related disorders varies between 2% and 19%. We can assume that the numbers are similar for children who speak more than one language.
- #5** Think about your own family situation and the ages at which your children are exposed to their various languages. There are **two 'types' of bi-**

linguals. If your child is exposed to all of their languages before the age of three or five depending on what you read, they're considered to be a **simultaneous bilingual child**. In that case, you can expect your child to proceed through the stages of development laid out earlier in this handbook, in the 'What is happening?' sections of each age bracket. Children who are exposed to their second or additional languages after the first language is well-established e.g. when they go to preschool or school, are considered **sequential bilingual children**. The pattern of language development is quite different here, for one because the child is older and will not babble in the additional language. Things you may notice are the use of all-purpose verbs that aren't very specific (*get, do, go, have, look, play, put, see, want*), sentences that lack important grammatical elements like verb endings and structural words (*if, when, because, for, to*), or the fact that your child repeats what another person has said. Remember that language development is a complex process that takes many years. **The key is to notice development over time.**

- #6** Your bilingual child's language development is distributed across the languages. Sometimes they will know words in one language but not the other.

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We use different languages for different purposes with different people in different places, and our children's language skills reflect that.

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Your bilingual child is not becoming a monolingual speaker in each their languages. Their vocabulary knowledge may cover different topics in the home language than in the school language. It's important to think of your child's vocabulary as all the words they know in all their languages combined. This means that if they're seeing an SLT, they need to have *all* of their languages tested. It's not unusual for bilingual children to perform better in certain language tasks in one language as opposed to the other. They might be good at vocabulary and story-telling in the home language but not as good in the community language, especially when they've just started school in that language.

- #7 The languages interact with each other. Bilingual children can distinguish between their languages, but the languages interact with each other and are switched on in the brain all the time. Bilingual people tend to mix languages and switch between them to different degrees. Find out more about [language mixing here](#).
- #8 Everyone is different and every bilingual situation is unique. Bilingual children can differ greatly in how their languages develop⁵⁸. The variation depends on a range of factors that affect language development, like the number of languages spoken, the age at which children are exposed to each of them, the opportunities they have to use them, their own motivation which can change over time, how similar or different the languages are, the social value attached to the languages and so on. The assessment of multilingual children's speech and language skills needs to take these factors into account.

6.2 What is late talking?

Children are considered late talkers when they are between 18 and 35 months old, understanding what you say to them **but** they have what we call a **limited expressive vocabulary**. This means that they don't use a lot of words or different kinds of words (nouns, verbs, adjectives and prepositions) and word combinations. Note that for bilingual children, you need to consider their total vocabulary, the words they know in all their languages combined. If only one of their languages has a limited vocabulary, this is likely to be due to a lack of exposure in that language, not a true delay. To be considered a late talker, all other areas of development need to be 'typical' - things like their play and when they walked, hearing, and so on. Overall, the outlook is good for late talkers with most of them moving into the average range on language tests by preschool⁵⁹.

⁵⁸ A boy's expressive vocabulary can vary from 79 words to 511 words at 24 months of age and still be considered within normal limits!

⁵⁹ At 24 months, 50-70% of children could catch up with their peers. One study showed, however, that 82% of toddlers who failed language screenings at 30 months had not recovered by age 6. In general, children who were late talkers do continue to do more poorly on language testing in school. This means they're at risk for language disorders. (These are called Specific Language Impairment (SLI) or Developmental Language Disorders (DLD). These problems are persistent language problems that tend to be diagnosed after age 4).

How can I identify late talking in my child?

If your child is 24 months old and does not yet use 50 words or two word combinations counted across all their languages, they would be considered **late talkers**. Between 18-20 months, you should expect your child to be using at least 10 words (distributed across the languages)⁶⁰. They might have more words in one language than the other, but it's the total amount you're interested in.

First words usually come any time from 8 to 15 months. Note that imitating for example animal or vehicle noises (like *meow* for cat or *brrr* for car) also count as words. So do made-up words, as long as your child uses the same sequence of sounds each time they refer to the same object. If they always say *uppa* when they see an *airplane*, then that is their word for it and it counts as one. Their first words don't have to be understandable to people outside the family, as long as your child consistently uses the same words or syllables to refer to something. At 18 months, children learn about 10 new words per month. Between 17 and 20 months, there is often a rapid vocabulary spurt as they approach the 50-word mark and they learn several new words daily.

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Please don't focus too much on the numbers - these are only rough guides. Children make progress at different rates, but it is important to see steady progress.

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Do they grow out of it?

About 50% of late talkers score in the normal range by three years of age on vocabulary measures and in the normal range of grammar and conversational skills by school age. **Late bloomers** is the name given to children

⁶⁰ Elizabeth Peña, Professor in the School of Education at the University of California, Irvine.

who catch up in the 3- to 5-year old period. As it's impossible to know in advance if your child is going to be a late bloomer, an early appointment with an SLT is recommended. Note that while late talking is a risk factor for language or learning disorders, it is neither a clinical condition nor a certain sign of disorder to come. It is difficult to predict which late talkers are likely to have long-term problems. Outcomes tend to be poorer for children who have problems with understanding⁶¹ as well as speaking, who don't communicate using gestures and who don't imitate body movements. If your child still has language problems at the age of five and over, the gaps in their language tend not to close over time.



⁶¹ Rhea Paul recommends that late talkers who also struggle with language comprehension or understanding should receive intervention while children whose comprehension is normal should receive only occasional monitoring of language growth.

6.3 When should I see a speech & language therapist (SLT)?

The Hanen Centre in Canada⁶² suggests that your child needs to see an SLT if

- At 18 months, they are not using at least 20 words in total across their languages, including different types of words, such as nouns or names of things (*cup, biccie* for biscuit), verbs or doing words (*eat, go*), prepositions or location words (*up, down*), adjectives or describing words (*hot, mine*), and social words (*hi, bye*). They need different types of words so that they can combine them into phrases like *want biccie*.

Or

- at 24 months, they're not using at least 100 words in total across all of their languages and combining two words together. The word combinations need to be original. Phrases like *Thank you. I want to, what's that?* are not strictly speaking two-word combinations. They're chunks that are learned as one unit. Examples of real word combinations come from the child themselves, that they haven't heard before. Things like "*kitty gone*", or "*dirty dress*".

The research suggests that **language delay can be reliably identified at 24 months**. It's never too early to have the referral made to a SLT (especially since there might be waiting lists). The earlier the problem is identified, the sooner an SLT can intervene and the better your child's chances of making progress and catching up.⁶³

6.4 What can I do to help?⁶⁴

- #1 **Get a referral to an SLT** and preferably one who is experienced in working with multilingual families. Don't accept advice to drop a home lan-

⁶² The Hanen Centre is a not-for-profit registered charitable organisation, based in Toronto, Canada. It defines its mission as, "providing the important people in a child's life with the knowledge and training they need to help the child develop the best possible language, social and literacy skills".

⁶³ A recent multinational study involving 59 professionals from psychology, education, SLT, paediatrics and child psychiatry says that healthcare professionals should rely on concerns expressed by the people who know the child well.

⁶⁴ Laura Mize is an American paediatric speech and language therapist with loads of great free resources on her website [Teach Me To Talk](https://www.teachmetotalk.com/).

guage. Also, don't feel under pressure to follow a one person one language (OPOL) approach, as this isn't the only way to nurture multilingual development. For more on what to expect from a speech and language therapy assessment, read [this article](#).

- #2 Get your child's hearing checked** just to make sure there are no issues.
- #3** If you're worried that your child's speaking is not progressing, set aside **30 minutes a day to focus on interacting with them**. During this time, you want to observe them closely and see what they're interested in. What are they looking at? Playing with? Children's language develops better when we describe what **they** are doing rather than directing their attention to what we are interested in. So it should sound something like *Oh, you're walking to the sofa. Plop! You sat down!* instead of *Look Jamie, here's a book. Look at the book.* This small action consistently taken will make a difference.
- #4 Keep a communication diary**. This can be a notepad where you write down how your child communicates. Do they use their whole body, for example move away to say *I don't want that*? Are their words accompanied by gestures, for example shaking their head to say no? Can you identify why they are communicating? General progress says more than counting words every day. You want to see new words appearing over the course of a month. Children need to discover different ways to communicate and how those ways can reinforce or complement each other. This includes things like greeting you, indicating farewell or goodbye, requesting action like holding his hands up to say *pick me up*, rejecting something, and so on. These can be done using words or gestures or whole-body movements. A great resource for that is [First Words Project](#) - you can find a list of 16 gestures that your child should be using by 16 months. Note that these gestures vary between cultures.
- #5 Record the different types of words your child uses**. What noun⁶⁵, verbs⁶⁶, adjectives, prepositions and so on. A child needs nouns and verbs in order to put words together. Keep a record of the different types of words that your child is using in all of their languages. Remember that it's normal for children to have a word in one language and not in another.

⁶⁵ For tips on how to build your child's noun vocabulary, read [this](#).

⁶⁶ There is research showing that children who use a range of different verbs develop better when it comes to grammar than children who use a more restricted range of verbs. You need to think about the verbs in all of your child's languages. For more details about verbs and how to develop your child's verb vocabulary, read [this](#).



7

**Let's end
on a high
note!**

We hope our guide is a useful companion along your child's bilingual journey, and that it provides support, insights, inspiring ideas, and reassurance where needed to successfully raise your child to become bilingual. Of course, we can't take the credit, it is all down to your skills and determination as a parent. Every child is unique, every family situation is different, and so is every learning process. While our guide provides custom-made tips and activities, it is you, as a parent, who turns words into actions and adapts our suggestions to your family situation and your child's needs. We believe you can do it. And no matter where you land, be proud of your efforts and achievements.

Your child is incredibly lucky to be raised in a multilingual family, and - while they may not show it yet - they will be grateful for this enriching, life-long gift, for the opportunities and the sense of closeness to their heritage that you're giving them. We hope you will proudly continue this journey and wish you the best of luck in your future endeavours as a bilingual family!

Remember to keep an eye on our website for interesting videos and language resources!



8

Glossary

2P2L	2 Persons 2 Languages: A family language strategy where parents each speak two languages and they each speak both of those languages with their child.
Code-switching	A phenomenon where bilingual speakers alternate between multiple languages in the same utterance, sentence or conversation. Unlike language mixing, code-switching is not random, as it serves communicative objectives of the speaker.
Cognitive advantage	An advantage that is related to the mental processes of perception, memory, judgment, and reasoning.
DLD (developmental language disorder)	A condition where children have problems understanding and/or using spoken language.
Family language	The language(s) spoken among the members of your family, within and/or outside your home.
Family language strategy	A plan in which parents set out how they can maximise the exposure to each of the languages they want their child to learn
Home language	Can be used interchangeably with ‘family language’ - the language(s) you speak in your home with your partner and/or your children
Language exposure	The amount of time that a person hears or is surrounded by a certain language.

Language mixing	A phenomenon that occurs in the process of language learning, where the learner mixes two or more languages, often switching to another language when they can't find the words in one.
Majority language	A language that is spoken by the majority of the population - in most cases, this is a societal language.
Metalinguistic awareness	The ability to consciously reflect on your own language(s) or language use.
Minority language	A language that is spoken by a minority of the population - in most cases this is not a societal language.
mL@H	Minority Language at Home: a family language strategy where one or more minority language(s) is/are spoken at home (so not the language spoken by the majority of the population).
Native language = mother tongue	The language(s) you acquire while growing up, and of which you have an intuitive knowledge.
OPOL	One Person, One Language: a family language strategy where each parent sticks to speaking one language to their child, usually their native language.

School language	The language that is used at the school your child attends. In most cases, this is the societal or majority language, unless your child attends an international school or a special school where (part of) the curriculum is taught in a minority language.
SLT (Speech and Language Therapist)	Health professionals who treat patients with communication difficulties, such as speech and language delays or disorders.
Societal language	The national language(s), the official language(s) spoken in your country of residence.
T&P	Time and Place: a family language strategy where the language spoken depends on time or place (e.g. English is spoken during meals or on weekends, Italian is spoken in the living room, etc.)

9

Q&A index

How much language exposure does a child need?

- Ch 3.4

Which language should you speak with your child?

- Ch 3.4
- Ch 4.1.4
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How to get used to speaking your language with your baby?

- Ch 4.2.5

How to motivate a child to speak your language?

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- Ch 4.5.5
- Ch 4.6.5
- Ch 4.7.5

How to respond to those who oppose your decision to raise a bilingual child?

- Ch 5



10

Resources

Books for the multilingual family

- *Bilingual. Life and reality* by François Grosjean
- *Bringing up a bilingual child* by Rita Rosenback
- *Raising a bilingual child* by Barbara Zurer Pearson
- *Learning to Read and Write in the Multilingual Family* by Xiao-lei Wang
- *Growing up with two languages* by Una Cummingham
- *Language strategies for bilingual families* by Suzanne Barron-Hauwaert
- *An Introduction to Bilingual Development* by Annick De Houwer
- *Bilingual First Language Acquisition* by Annick De Houwer
- *A Parents' and Teachers' Guide to Bilingualism* by Colin Baker
- *Bilingual children: a guide for parents* by Jürgen Meisel

Websites

> for advice and tips

<https://bilingualkidsrock.com/>

<https://bilingualkidspot.com/>

<https://multilingualparenting.com/>

<https://www.thepiripirilexicon.com/>

> for research

<https://www.multilingual-matters.com/>

<https://www.bilingualism-matters.ppls.ed.ac.uk/>

<https://www.multilingualmind.eu/>

Other resources

There are numerous online forums, talking groups and social media pages for parents raising bilingual children, both in international and in language-specific settings. If you'd like to be part of a community of parents raising bilingual children, have a look on social media or do an Internet search for groups in your language.



11

Authors and Contributors

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Rita Rosenback

Rita Rosenback is a Family Language Coach assisting families to make the most of their languages. She is the author of *Bringing up a Bilingual Child*. On her website multilingualparenting.com you can find hundreds of articles and Q&As on the topic of bilingual and multilingual children. She also runs a large [Facebook group](#) focusing on raising children to speak more than one language.



Ute Limacher-Riebold

Ute Limacher-Riebold PhD is a multilingual Family Language Consultant and Intercultural Communication Trainer at [Ute's International Lounge](#). As a linguist and lifelong international, she offers tailored advice and practical solutions in her trainings for parents who raise their children with multiple languages and cultures. She helps multilingual families find the most suitable strategies and resources to maintain their home languages and cultures, whilst learning others.



Mary-Pat O'Malley

Dr. Mary-Pat O'Malley is a speech and language therapist and lecturer with over 25 years of experience of working with families. She is passionate about helping speech & language therapists to carry out best practices with multilingual families and about supporting multilingual families to develop all of their child's languages using evidence-based strategies. She is involved in a range of research projects aiming to improve speech and language therapy services for multilingual families. Her website is called [Talk Nua](#).

Contributors

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Annick De Houwer is Professor of Language Acquisition and Multilingualism at the University of Erfurt in Germany, and director of [HaBilNet](#), or 'Harmonious Bilingual Network', an association that aims to support and stimulate scientific research into harmonious bilingualism. She is considered a pioneer in the field of bilingual language acquisition.

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Casey Lew-Williams

Casey Lew-Williams is professor of Psychology at Princeton University, and director of the Princeton '[Baby Lab](#)', a research group in the Department of Psychology at Princeton that studies how children learn, and how their ability to learn supports their development.



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