

# What parents want to know about bilingualism

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Parents and caretakers<sup>1</sup> with bilingual children often have concerns about their children's bilingualism. In an effort to address some of their queries, I asked Corey Heller<sup>2</sup> to send me a list of questions most often asked. Below, I present eleven questions along with my answers. The latter are based on my own research on bilingualism over the years, knowledge of the field that I first entered in the early 1970's, being a bilingual parent, and my own life as a bilingual. At the end of each answer, I indicate the chapters in my new book, *Bilingual: Life and Reality* (Harvard University Press, 2010) in which I offer additional information. Note that my book has two parts: Bilingual adults (chapters 1-13) and Bilingual children (chapters 14-19).

## 1. How can one tell if children are getting enough exposure to each language?

In the case of children acquiring two languages simultaneously, it is important that they receive input (exposure) from each language on a daily or almost daily basis when the parents are using a strategy that involves both languages. If the parents' aim is simply to bring the child into contact with another language, then less input is necessary. But if they want the child to use two languages on a daily basis, then there must be a lot of input from both languages.

As to the nature of the input, two points are important. First, the input should come from interaction with people (talking, playing, or reading) and not just from DVDs and television. Children will develop a language if they feel they need it and human interactants create that need. Second, moments should be reserved where the input comes from people who do not know the other language, if at all possible, so that the input is free of elements of that other language in the form of code-switches and borrowings. Bringing in the other language is normal in a bilingual environment but it is important that bilingual children realize that they will also find themselves in monolingual situations at various times where only one language can be used.

Finally, there is no good measure of "enough exposure" but if the child is starting to be clearly dominant in one language and is tending not to understand or speak the other, then changes will have to be brought to the relative importance given to the two (or more) languages in his or her life. (Chapters 4, 5, 14, 15, 16 & 17).

## 2. Which is the "best" method for helping children become bilingual (e.g. one parent - one language, the minority language at home, etc.)?

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<sup>1</sup> Henceforth, I will use the word "parents" for parents and other caretakers.

<sup>2</sup> Corey Heller is the Editor-in-Chief of *Multilingual Living Magazine*. Through her work, she has first hand knowledge of the needs of parents and I am very grateful to her for these questions.

The strategy that I favor, and that I recommend to parents who wish to bring up their children with two languages, is to use one language in the home, usually the minority language, and the other language outside the home (I call this the "home - outside the home" strategy). This does mean that one of the parents has to speak his or her second (or third) language to the child so that everyone is using just one language at home. In addition, the language will need to be reinforced by people other than the parents (e.g. family members, friends, etc.) so as to give it a strong base. As for the outside language, usually the majority and hence the school language, it will have no problem finding its place. The strategy has a clear advantage in that the weaker language (the home language) will receive much more input than if only one parent uses it as in the one parent - one language strategy. In addition, things will be clear in the child's mind: at home, language X is spoken, and outside the home, it is language Y. (Chapter 17).

3. Is it all right to change from one method to another or one language to another in the home?

The circumstances of life can change language habits in a family such as when the family restructures itself or when it moves to another country or region where a different majority language is used. When that happens, it is normal that parents also readjust aspects of language behavior in the family. If the aim is to continue to bring up a child as a bilingual, two points need to be considered. First, the crucial factor of need for both languages must continue to be present. I am talking here of a real, communicative, need for the languages and not a need imposed by the parents. Children are very good at judging whether it is worth maintaining a language or letting it wither away. If they know that both parents master one of the two languages, then they will have a tendency to speak just that language and to let go of the other language. Children can go in and out of languages very quickly depending on the need they have, or no longer have, for them. Parents should therefore think about ways of maintaining a need for each language in their children.

The second point is that it is important, if the child is old enough, to talk to him or her about changes in strategy. Children go through a period where the language-person bond is quite strong. If the change in strategy requires that an adult speak a different language, care will have to be taken during the transition phase, and the child's reaction to the change will have to be monitored and reacted to. I would suggest that the strategy change not take place suddenly but over a short period of time; the precise length will depend on the child's reaction to the change. (Chapters 14, 15 & 17).

4. What does research say, in layman's terms, about the benefits of bilingualism / multilingualism over monolingualism?

There are many advantages to being bilingual: to communicate with people of different languages and cultures; to speak to relatives with whom one would not communicate otherwise; to become literate in more than one language; to facilitate the learning of other languages; to foster open-mindedness and have different perspectives on life; to increase job opportunities; to help others whose language and culture you know, etc. These reasons are not based directly on research as such - they are the opinions of individuals, many of them bilingual - but they make a lot of sense and they are heard repeatedly.

As for benefits that are proposed by research, it is important that one be very careful with older studies since they did not always control for important factors. More recent studies indicate that bilingual children do better than monolingual children in some domains (e.g.

tasks that require control of attention, also called selective control); they do as well as monolinguals in other domains (e.g. tasks that require analysis of representation); and they sometimes do less well than monolinguals (e.g. in vocabulary tests where only one language is taken at a time, and the child is dominant in a language). The latter result can be explained by means of the Complementarity Principle which states that bilinguals usually acquire and use their languages for different purposes, in different domains of life, with different people. Different aspects of life often require different languages. Unfortunately, research rarely takes into account this principle and hence bilingual children are penalized when compared to their monolingual counterparts. (Chapters 3, 9 & 18).

5. Is it all right to raise a child in a non-native language, even if parents don't speak the language absolutely perfectly (but well enough) and they don't have a perfect native accent (but it is good enough)?

The really important factor in children acquiring two (or more) languages, and then maintaining them, is the need they have for those languages: to communicate with parents and family members, to take part in daycare or school activities, to interact with people in their community, etc. If parents can create the need for more than one language, and other factors are favorable, then children will become bilingual.

Among the other factors, we find the amount of language input and the type of input, both mentioned in the question above. Two points are important. First, not knowing a language perfectly well and having an accent in it is not a reason for not speaking that language to a child. After all, in families who adopt the "one language in the home, the other outside the home" strategy, there is often one parent who is not a native speaker of the home language. Note also that many families who have changed linguistic regions or countries, and have to help their children who are schooled in another language, often do not themselves have perfect knowledge of the outside language.

The second point is that it is very important for children to receive as much exposure as possible to each language. Thus, the parents who don't know a language well, but who are using it with their child, will want to find ways of increasing the child's exposure to that language. Sometimes this is easy (e.g. it is the language of the community and/or the school) but sometimes it is more difficult. In my new book, I relate how a family developed various stratagems to increase their children's natural exposure to their weaker language. (Chapters 14 & 17).

6. Are there specific golden rules that every family should follow about raising children in more than one language?

Every bilingual family is different from the other and so it is difficult to establish the same rules for everyone. I would personally insist on a number of things. First, one should encourage parents to clearly understand the factors that help children acquire a language in addition to the first language. The need factor is crucial; without it, a child may simply not acquire a language. But other factors such as the amount and type of input, the role of the family, the role of the school and the community, and attitudes towards the language, the culture, and bilingualism are also critical.

The second point is that children should be put regularly in monolingual situations if at all possible, that is situations where only one of the two languages can be used (I have already mentioned this point above). In families bringing up bilingual children, there are

adults who are also bilingual and who therefore call upon bilingual communication phenomena such as code-switching and borrowing. This is quite natural and does not need to be changed. But children must also be put in situations where only one language can be used so that they learn, little by little, how to navigate between the monolingual mode of communication and the bilingual mode.

The third point is that parents must receive support from others in their venture to make their children bilingual. In turn, they must be very supportive of their children's language knowledge and use. When the children are a bit older, parents should talk to them about bilingualism as well as biculturalism (if several cultures are involved). I personally remember that as an adolescent, I missed having parents who could explain to me what I was going through linguistically and culturally. I would have liked to understand why I didn't know one language as well as the other, why I was making interferences, why I had difficulties translating, and so on. There is now sufficient literature on bilingualism to inform parents what it means to live with two or more languages.

Finally, the bilingualism of children should be a source of joy, both for parents and children, even if there are occasional moments of difficulties (e.g. the first days in a school that uses the child's weaker language; instances where the child is teased or embarrassed, etc.). If there comes a time where the moments of hardship outweigh the moments of happiness, then it is important that parents take some action such as readjusting the importance, and the role, of the child's languages. (Chapters 14, 16 & 17).

7. Is it worth it for a spouse to speak his/her language even if they are only with the child a little bit of the time?

Throughout my career and in all my writings, I have defended the acquisition and use of several languages. If the exposure to one language is not as great as to the other, then the child will probably not know the language very well, but at least he or she will have had some exposure to it. In addition, it is important for the spouse who sees the child less to know that the latter is being exposed to his or her language. Of course, expectations should not be very high if the language input is not sufficiently important. However, life reserves many changes and the weaker language may suddenly take on a more important role, so I would not exclude it from the child's life.

8. How should one deal with more than two languages in the family and how can one add an additional language to an already bilingual household?

Many families live with more than two languages as when each parent speaks his or her language and another caretaker (or teacher in school) uses a third one. Two points need to be underlined. First, the need factor (and other contributing factors) have to be present for the child to pick up two or more languages. Second, some thought should be given to the kind of exposure the child will receive from each language and how moments of monolingual interaction can be set up. If parents realize that the exposure to a third language won't be sufficient, and a real need for the language cannot be induced, then they may want to postpone bringing it in. (Chapter 14).

9. What will happen to the children's bilingualism when they start going to school in the community language?

If one of the children's languages is already the community/school language then it will be given an incredible burst when they start attending school. Several reasons explain this: it will be used much more than before and its domains of use will expand; it will be used by peers and the teachers (new and important people in the children's lives); and it will be the language in which the first steps in literacy are undertaken. Within only a few months, it may well become the children's dominant language which they will use increasingly and bring home with them (with their home work, friends, etc.). They may even try to use it exclusively with their parents so as not to be different from other children. It is well known that between ages six and the early teens, many children will give the school or majority language their priority to the detriment of the weaker, home, language. Some may even refuse to speak the latter to their parents and other family members. Hence, parents will want to develop various stratagems to reinforce the weaker language. If they can find ways of "holding on" until the teenage years, there is every chance that the weaker language will find its niche and the bilingualism of their children will be stabilized, even if they become dominant in the majority language. (Chapters 3, 14 & 17).

10. What should be done when children have been diagnosed with a speech impediment and they are told that their bilingualism / multilingualism is the cause? Is it all right to go against what the speech therapist / school therapist may say and still speak a native language at home?

Bilingualism researcher and speech therapist, Susanne Döpke, states clearly that bilingualism is not the cause of language delay and language disorders. She insists that discontinuing the home language is not going to improve the bilingual child's abilities in the majority (school) language; on the contrary, it may have other prejudicial consequences. It is a widespread and erroneous idea, still conveyed by some professionals, that things will improve if parents revert to just one language. In fact, no change should take place in the language ecology of the family since retracting a language will not improve the disorder. We also know that in children with specific language impairment (SLI), the deficit pattern in monolingual and bilingual children is the same.

Since there is no empirical support for what some professionals propose, that is to stop speaking one of the languages (usually the home language), parents who are bringing up their child bilingual should continue to do so. This said, it is crucial that they adopt a well-established family strategy, that they be aware of the factors that will enhance bilingualism, and that they receive a lot of support from their family, friends as well as the professionals involved with their children, such as educators and language pathologists. (Chapters 14, 17 & 18).

11. What about cultural issues such as bilingual children assimilating into the community while also retaining their connection to the parents' cultures?

If bilingual children are in contact with two or more cultures (for example, one in the home and the other in the larger community), then parents will want to be mindful of what it means to be bicultural and the process of identifying with one's cultures. Since becoming bicultural is at times more difficult than becoming bilingual, parents will want to spend time with children, and especially adolescents, helping them come to terms with their biculturalism. Some young people choose to belong to just one culture, either culture A or culture B, but by so doing they are turning away from one of their two cultures; in the long run they may well become dissatisfied with their decision. Others may reject both cultures. This is not a satisfactory solution either as they will often feel marginal or ambivalent. The

optimal solution is to identify with both cultures, A and B, sometimes to varying degrees, and hence to accept fully one's biculturalism. This identity decision may take some time to reach and it is critical that the young person be accompanied along the way by his or her parents, family members and friends. As I state in my book, biculturals who are allowed to be who they are, and who accept their dual heritage, are invaluable members of society who bridge the gap between the cultures they belong to. (Chapter 10).

The interested reader can find an interview of François Grosjean at [http://www.francoisgrosjean.ch/interview\\_en.html](http://www.francoisgrosjean.ch/interview_en.html)