

14: Learning more than one language

Information for parents/carers

Will learning more than one language make my child talk later than others?

No. Bilingualism does not cause language delay
Your child should talk at the same time as children learning one language

Will it be difficult for my child to learn more than one language?

No. Most of the world's population speak more than one language.
Children can start learning more than one language from birth. The first 3 years are an important time for learning as the brain develops quickly.

I speak more than one language. Which one should I use when talking to my child?

Use your strongest language because children need to hear a good language model that is correct and fluent. Don't worry if you mix languages when talking. It is natural for people who speak more than one language to do this. Your child will eventually learn that the two languages are different.

Is it important for my child to learn English before starting nursery or school?

No. It is important that your child has good skills in their home language before they start school. Once children know how to use one language they can usually learn another one very quickly. Don't worry about teaching your child English. They will learn this in nursery/school.

There is no evidence that bilingual children learn to speak later. Some children, whether learning two languages or only one, learn to speak later than others. If a child has a speech or language problem, it will show up in both languages; however these problems are *not caused* by learning two languages.

Advantages

- Cognitive: choosing between languages can develop a flexibility of thinking and creativity that can be applied to other problem solving areas.
- Educational: there are educational advantages so keep using your home language even when your child has started school and is speaking English.
- Meta-linguistic awareness: bilingualism builds a natural awareness of how language works.
- Social: they can be more tolerant and show sensitivity to others from a young age. They will be able to communicate with a wider range of family and friends.
- Economic: they may have more job opportunities in the future.
- Cultural: they will have a wider cultural experience and may develop a greater tolerance of cultural and racial differences.

How can you help?

In your home language:

- Talk and play with your child throughout the day; for example, when cooking and shopping, when playing and reading together, at bath time and meal times.
- Sing nursery rhymes and songs.
- Try to find books written in your home language for your child. If there aren't any at the library, try online or make your own.
- Accept your child mixing two or more languages together in the same sentence. They may use the word that comes to mind fastest. It is not a sign of confusion or any cause for concern; they are simply making use of all of their language skills.
- It is fine for different family members to use different languages with your child e.g. Dad using his first language of English and Mum using her first language of Polish. Your child will get used to this and using different languages.
- Don't worry if you slip from your home language into English. This is natural, even for bilingual adults.

- Even when they have learned English, it is important you keep speaking to them in your home language. This will help them to understand and learn a wider range of words and more complex sentence structures as they get older.
- Carry on using your home language with them, even if they talk to you in English and don't seem to want to speak in your language. They will still be able to learn it from hearing it around them and it will help them to talk to other family members and those in your home language community.
- Find opportunities, if possible, for your child to play with other children who speak your home language.
- When your child is ready, help them to learn the names of the languages they speak and to feel proud of each language.