Hampshire County Council

Ethnic Minority and Traveller Achievement Service

Bringing up your child in more than one language: a guide for parents and carers

In many families, and for many different reasons, more than one language is spoken. In some families, both parents/carers share the same first language; in some, each parent/carer speaks a different language and they use another shared language when talking to each other; in other families, lots of different languages are in use.



Whatever your situation, maybe you have questions about bringing up your child in more than one language. This leaflet might help answer some of those questions.

UNCRC Article 30: Every child has the right to learn and use the language, customs and religion of their family, whether or not these are shared by the majority of the people in the country where they live.

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What the research says

Bi- and multi-lingual children tend to:

- do well at school and achieve good grades in their exams
- learn other languages more easily
- develop stronger literacy abilities in English if they come to school with a solid foundation in their first language
- develop more flexibility in their thinking as a result of processing information through two different languages
- have a broader world view from seeing things from different cultural perspectives
- be good at problem solving and creative expression
- express more tolerant attitudes towards others

Advantages of being bilingual

Speaking two or more languages gives people an additional, valuable skill; a person with two or more languages can have a wider choice of jobs.

Where it's valued by those around them, bilingualism raises a child's self-esteem and helps make them feel good about themselves. Children are more likely to maintain their cultural identities if they are proud or positive about their language and culture.

The ability to communicate with other family members eg grandparents helps to build and maintain a sense of belonging within the extended family and community.

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Tips for parents/carers

- Talk to your child in your first language, even when the child is too little to fully understand.
- Teach your child nursery rhymes and songs in your own language.
- Enjoy sharing stories with your child in your first language.
- Where available, watch and listen to age-appropriate media in your first language.
- Be proud to speak to your child in your language in public.
- Take your child to community gatherings where they will hear people using your language and where they can develop their knowledge and understanding of their culture.
- Try not to laugh at or tease your child because of their accent or any mistakes they may make.
- Encourage your child to use their first language as a tool for learning about the world; through their school work, for homework, to socialise with others and to explore their interests.

Frequently Asked Questions

How can I help my child to continue to use my family's languages?

Keep using your family language(s) at home. Talk to your child in your family language(s). Help them with their school work by talking about concepts, topics and the meanings of words in your family language(s). This will give them opportunities to continue to develop their family language skills in meaningful ways.

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My child mixes the languages. Is this worrying?

Mixing languages is quite common with bilingual children; it does not mean that they are confused - they are simply using all of their language resources to express themselves.

Now my child is in school in the UK, should I start speaking English to them at home?

Carry on speaking to your child in your home language(s). This is a good way of giving them opportunities to carry on developing their skills in these languages and to maintain their own identity and culture.

My child will only talk to me in English. What should I do?

Many bilingual children do this, especially when they know their parents understand English. Continue to use your family language(s) with them; this will give them the best chance of maintaining their first language skills.

My child's teacher tells me that my child does not speak much at school. Should I be worried?

Many children choose not to speak the new language for a period of time, maybe because they feel shy about it or because they don't want to speak it until they feel they can do it well. This 'silent phase' is relatively common; most children will find their voice at school when they are ready.