

learning links



Helping Kids Learn

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Information Sheet 63

Raising multilingual children

By Brooke Mitchell, Speech Pathologist, Learning Links

Learning more than one language can be a rewarding experience for children. Being able to communicate means we can relate positively to the people in our lives. Children who use more than one language can understand and relate to a wider range of people in their community and have the ability to express themselves in more than one way.

How children learn more than one language

At the same time

Two languages are learnt from birth e.g. one parent speaks Vietnamese and the other Cantonese, from the time the child is born. The child learns languages at the same time. The child goes through the following stages:

- The child mixes the languages in short phrases and sentences.
- They start to understand when to use particular words with different people.
- At 3-4 years of age, children have an increasing awareness of which words belong with which language and start to use words with the right language.
- Most often, one language is used more and becomes the main language.

Your child's ability to learn more than one language is influenced by their motivation, interests and personality.

One at a time

One language is learnt first and the second is learnt later e.g. the child learns Arabic at home and then English when they start preschool. The child goes through the following stages:

- The child observes and may be quieter than usual for a time. They may communicate non-verbally e.g. through gestures and pointing and then start to use whole memorised phrases.
- The child starts to talk in the second language and may make some errors in that language.
- They then attempt to speak correctly in the second language (vocabulary, grammar, sentence structure).

Children who use more than one language can understand and relate to a wider range of people in their community and have the ability to express themselves in more than one way.

Your child's ability to learn more than one language is influenced by their motivation, interests and personality. It helps when children hear clear and correct language in all of the languages they are exposed to. Below are some tips to help the process.

Tips to help children learn more than one language

- Always use your home language when talking with your child. Try to use your home language 90% of the time (you will find it difficult to use it all the time).
- By speaking in your home language, you will be providing the best language model for your child. The best way for a child to learn a second language is to work on and maintain their home language. The stronger a first language, the easier it is to learn a second language.
- Expose your child to your own language in many ways – share books, songs and games with your child in your home language.
- Talk with your child in your home language while doing everyday activities e.g. hanging out the washing and playing at the park.

About us

Learning Links is a charity and non-profit children's learning organisation formed in 1972 by parents and professionals to help children with disabilities and learning support needs.

Our vision is of a community where all children and families have equal access to learning opportunities and quality support.

Our services

Children under 6

- Early childhood intervention for babies, toddlers and preschoolers with a disability or developmental delay.
- Assisting children with disabilities to transition to school.
- Speech therapy, occupational therapy and physiotherapy.
- Mobile toy library service.
- An inclusive preschool.
- FREE story time sessions at Fairfield Library.

Children attending school

- Specialist assessments to determine your child's educational needs.
- Reading and maths support for children who are falling behind at school.
- Speech therapy and occupational therapy.
- Social skills and anxiety management groups.
- Transition to school groups.
- Counselling.

Parents, carers and families

- Case management services.
- Support to families who have just received a diagnosis of a disability for their child.
- Programs to help parents support their child's communication.
- A range of programs to develop parenting skills.
- Support groups for carers of children with a disability, developmental delay or chronic medical condition (MyTime).
- FREE program for parents living in Cabramatta on how to tutor children of preschool age (HIPPPY).

Workshops

Learning Links also delivers workshops for parents, carers and professionals working with children on a range of topic areas including ADHD, autism, behaviour, child development, children's learning, children's wellbeing, communication, counselling and fine motor skills.

Learning Links has services in five Sydney locations. We also offer some services to children in country NSW, the ACT, and some programs Australia-wide and in New Zealand. A complete list of locations and contact numbers is on the back page.

Learning Links

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- Your child will be able to learn English in other situations e.g. at day care, preschool, playgroup or when playing with English speaking friends.
- If you use more than one language with your child, consider the following strategies:
 - USE: 'One person = one language': Encourage people to use the same language when talking to the child e.g. grandparents always use Cantonese, father always uses English.

OR:

- USE: 'One location = one language': If you speak well in more than one language, choose the language you want to use with your child in different locations e.g. mother may speak Vietnamese at home, and English at the shops.
- If you choose 'one location = one language', you need to be fluent and comfortable in speaking your second language in those locations.
- Do not switch between languages when talking e.g. do not ask a question in Cantonese, and follow this with a comment in English.
- Let children express themselves in whatever language they are comfortable using. If your child starts to learn another language, such as English, encourage them to still keep using their home language as well.

How you communicate with your child in more than one language will impact their language development. It is important for your child to hear clear and correct models of language. If you speak two languages, try not to mix or switch between languages in one conversation.

Your child may go through a period of being quieter than usual, as they are observing which words belong with which language.

What to expect

- You may find your child mixes two languages in one sentence e.g. "I want aqua". This is a natural and important part of learning more than one language.
- Your child may go through a period of being quieter than usual, as they are observing which words belong with which language. This may last several months, but it is a normal stage some children go through in developing an understanding of language. Try not to pressure them during this time, but if you are concerned, talk to your G.P. or Early Childhood Nurse.
- Your child may also stop communicating in their home language for a while, while learning a second language.
- Your child will develop a main language, but many children are able to talk fluently in both languages throughout their lives.

Speech or language delays

- Children learn languages differently, however it is important to look at how well your child communicates in their home language – they should have typical speech and language development in their home language.
- If you feel your child has a speech or language delay in their home language, or if they have a hearing or learning difficulty, see an Early Childhood Nurse or G.P. to get details of a Speech Pathologist. Speech Pathologists help children and adults with communication difficulties.

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The best way for a child to learn a second language is to work on and maintain their home language.



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