

# The benefits of **MULTILINGUALISM** IN THE FAMILY



**ADVICE FOR  
PARENTS**

In the UK, schoolchildren have been found to speak more than 300 different languages. While learning English is important for multilingual children to integrate into the community, it is also crucial to understand that growing up with more than one language is a great opportunity for them.

Speaking two languages can help a child:

- Develop stronger social skills
- Be a better language learner
- Have better reading skills, attention and creative thinking
- Understand their own cultural heritage and communicate with the extended family

## FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

### **I am worried that my multilingual child may have a language disorder: what should I do?**

If you are worried that your multilingual child may have a language disorder, you can speak to your health visitor or to your child special needs coordinator if they are at school, or you can contact your local NHS Speech and Language Therapy services directly. You will need to speak to a qualified speech and language therapist who will make an assessment and eventually a diagnosis.

Difficulties with understanding language, not just producing language, may be a sign of a language disorder. However, it is very important to remember that multilingual children – just like children who only learn one language – need to have rich and varied opportunities to hear and use the language to learn it.

It is also crucial to remember that if a child has a language disorder, all of their languages will be affected, and that the child will have language and communication difficulties in all of them. It is therefore very important to make sure your speech and language therapist has all the relevant information about your child's language environment at home and outside the home, and that your child is assessed in both of their languages.

### **My multilingual child was diagnosed with a language disorder: should I drop one of our languages?**

If your child has been diagnosed with a language disorder you may feel that two languages are “too much” for your child and you may be tempted to drop your home language. However, there are excellent reasons why this is not a good idea. First, there is no research evidence showing that multilingualism makes a language disorder worse, nor that it interferes with treatment. Second, maintaining the home language is beneficial for the child's emotional development and for the family's well-being in general. For parents, speaking in their native language means being able to communicate with their child in a natural way and being able to keep up with the child's linguistic development. In addition, speaking the home language allows children to communicate and nurture relationships with their extended family.



**Our first child speaks and understands our home language very well, but their younger sibling only seems to want to speak English. What should I do?**

It is not uncommon for younger siblings to develop their home language skills a bit more slowly. This is usually because they get fewer one-to-one interactions with their parents, and because older children, especially if they already go to school, often prefer to speak English with their younger siblings.

First of all: don't give up! The little ones will get there eventually if you maintain the linguistic habits that were successful with your oldest child as much as possible. There are a few things you can do to help: if they are old enough, talk to your oldest child and explain to them that playing together in the home language is really important so that their sibling can learn to speak that language too. You can also try to come up with some play activities in the home language that involve the whole family, like a scavenger hunt, a game of hide and seek, or a board game. If possible, make this a regular thing. Finally, read to your children in your home language and, if your oldest is an independent reader, ask them to read to their sibling their favourite books.

**My child is learning to read in English and I would like for them to do so in our home language as well, but I am afraid this is going to slow down or compromise their reading in English. What should I do?**

If your child is learning to read in English, there is no reason to wait to teach them to read in your language as well. Research shows that some of the skills you need to read can transfer across languages and this is especially true when the two languages have the same writing system (for example, two alphabetic languages such as English and French have more in common than English and Chinese). This means that if your child already knows how to read in English, they may be faster at learning to read in your home language, but also that reading in your home language may help them learning to read in English. In addition, recent studies show that multilingual children are especially fast at learning new vocabulary from books, which in turn can help their reading comprehension. Reading also helps children develop knowledge about the world and reading in your own language will allow them to gain a deeper understanding of your culture, history and traditions.



## WHO ARE WE?

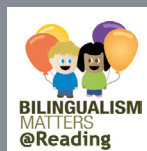
- The Centre for Literacy and Multilingualism at the University of Reading is the host of a branch of Bilingualism Matters, which provides research-based advice and information on child bilingualism to anyone interested or involved with raising, educating and caring for bilingual and multilingual children.

## HOW CAN WE HELP?

- Browse our website for events, useful information and answers to the most common questions about bringing up bilingual children

[research.reading.ac.uk/celm/](http://research.reading.ac.uk/celm/)

## MULTILINGUALISM IN THE FAMILY



**i** For more information, please visit our website [research.reading.ac.uk/celm/](http://research.reading.ac.uk/celm/)

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