

Tips for Families:

Raising Children to Speak More Than One Language

There are many ways to help a child learn more than one language. Always do what's best for your family!

Tips for Parents

Make sure kids hear their home language a lot, as early as possible.

Why? A child's brain is ready to learn languages at birth.

If you speak two languages at home, talk a lot in each language.

Why? It is best for language learning if a child hears both languages at the same time. Parents should try and spend at least 30% of time speaking the second language.

Make sure kids hear words in real life – don't depend on screens.

Why? The best way for young children to learn a language is by hearing people around them talk to them, and with each other. **Even better:** When parents or caregivers read and tell stories in their home language, children hear more and different types of words.

Practical ideas

One adult, one language:

One adult in the family can speak one language while another adult speaks the other. This way the child hears both languages every day.

One adult, both languages: One adult in the family can speak a mix of both languages. **Tip:** It is better to mix languages between sentences (i.e., "Look over there, a dog! Un chien!") instead of within sentences ("Look over there, un chien! A dog!").

Try both ideas. Why? There are many ways to help a child learn more than one language. It's okay to use both ideas listed above.

Join activities where your child can hear their home language outside of the home.

Speak with grandparents or other relatives. Go to local community events (such as free library programs, cultural festivals and so on). Interact with other people who speak the same language (for example, a babysitter who speaks Punjabi; piano lessons from a French teacher; a Mandarin-speaking soccer coach).

Why? The more a child hears a language spoken by others, the more it helps them learn.

For more information on early literacy and language development, please visit the Canadian Children's Literacy Foundation at www.childrensliteracy.ca



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Common Questions:

Raising Children to Speak More Than One Language

Question

Answer

Why should my child speak a language other than English or French?

There are many benefits to speaking more than one language! These include cognitive, social-emotional, professional, cultural, and personal benefits.



We don't speak English or French at home. Does this mean my child will have trouble learning English or French at school?

No. What's important is that your child hears lots of words at home, in any language, right from birth. When a child knows their home language well, it helps them understand how and why to communicate and use language. This helps them pick up their school language quite quickly, especially because the child will be around it and have lots of chances to practice at school.



We speak two languages at home. Does this mean my child will know fewer words than other kids when they start school?

No. Children who hear more than one language at home often know just as many words as a child who only hears one language at home. Sometimes they know even more words!

Here's an example: Two children are best friends. One comes from a family that speaks English and Farsi. The other comes from a family that speaks English only. When they start school, both children will know almost the same total number of words. The only difference is that one child's words will be in English and Farsi, and the other child's words will all be English. Once they start school, the child who speaks both Farsi and English should be able to catch up in English because they will be around the language more.



If we speak more than one language to our children, will they get confused and have poor language skills?

No. Children who hear more than one language have a lower chance of having a delay in their language skills than children who speak only one language. It's good news!



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