

## Bilingual Family Info

**How Kids Learn by Anne Martin-Montgomery, Director  
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Why learn a second language? There are many reasons that parents and children decide to learn a second or even third language. For the members of the international adoptive community, learning a second language is an important means to foster a positive self-image in the adopted child, create knowledge of and pride in the child's place of origin, and establish connections with multiple communities at home. For other families, learning a second language is a means of preparing children for a future in the global economy. And for all families, learning another language should be about having fun together.

There are distinct advantages to learning other languages. The ability to communicate in more than one language may have an impact on the originality, elaboration or flexibility of the thought process (Baker 2001). Learning another language incorporates learning about another culture and how it differs from that of your first language. By using more than one language, the bilingual or multi-lingual person will have a wider range of experiences within and between cultures. This includes developing insight into different social norms and practices. The process of knowing what to say and when to say it is "integral to intercultural communicative competence and fundamental to cross-cultural effectiveness" (Fantini 1992:77). These "clues" to the social nature of language are critical in communication.

The first thing to keep in mind is a simple and straightforward idea -- communication is at the heart of language. Learning a language is not about decoding a writing system, diagramming sentences, or reciting grammatical rules; it's about communicating with other people. Ultimately, it is about creating opportunities to communicate in a meaningful way. We are going to suggest ways in which parents can initiate, facilitate, and reinforce this process by employing strategies to create an environment for learning language. These strategies entail repetition through game playing, songs, crafts, and familiar activities as well as creating your own opportunities for

language learning.

What do we know about how children learn a second language? First, early exposure is best but it is never too late to start a second language. So if your child is 1, 12, or 30 NOW is the time to start. Early learning has distinct advantages; but the optimal age may actually be around puberty according to recent research (Fantini 1992). If you have the opportunity to expose your child at a very young age to more than one language, you can capitalize on the child's capacity to learn. In addition, you will help establish a positive attitude toward the language before your child receives outside influences that may negatively impact his or her attitude and study habits. In addition, there are distinct advantages to starting as early as possible. It is easier to develop phonological awareness at a young age. Children are more apt to pick up the accurate phonemes (sounds) and tones of Chinese when they begin learning early in life. As adults, we are well past the optimal age and have typically been "jaded" by the outdated, uninspired methods and materials commonly used in college level courses. So, we would like to ask you to set these ideas aside and think differently about how you and your child can proceed together.

**The Child's Ability to Learn** Unlike the experience of most adults who start a second language in high school or college, children proceed from the development of aural (listening comprehension skills) to oral (speaking skills) and finally to reading & writing. You can prioritize writing first but the cart won't move quickly when it's located in front of the horse. Children have special neurolinguistic, psycholinguistic, and cognitive capacities to learn language. In other words, they are programmed to learn. The practical experience of parents holds much of this theory to be self-evident. Your child was not born with a fully developed verbal capacity. This developed over time based on exposure from environmental influences - the adults and children around your child taught him or her how to speak. If your child joined your family through adoption, he or she may have "started over" with a new language giving you the opportunity to see first-hand how flexible and powerful a child's ability to learn language is.

Conversation is critical. In the process of learning a new language there are several stages a child and adult will go through. These include making mistakes, mixing languages together, and other "not perfect" results. These

are not only normal they are OK. The important thing you need to do as a parent is to focus on making language learning relevant. Relevance is best achieved through the development of conversation skills. The learning of isolated words is not the same as language acquisition. There is a distinction between learning and acquisition of a second language. This can best be summarized as a difference between making language judgments based on the "rules" of a language and making those judgments based on "feelings" (Krashen 1987). Knowing "what to say" is only half the process. It is often more important to know "when and how to say it" based on your gut instinct rather than a "rule." Research has demonstrated that meaningful oral exchanges are critical in second language learning (Swain & Lapkin 1998). How can you create an opportunity for meaningful exchanges? A natural rather than a formal environment is more conducive to the development of communication skills (Krashen & Terrell 1983). In the natural setting, listening comes before speaking. The last 2 steps - reading and writing, come later, based on the readiness of the student and "should not be forced" (Krashen & Terrell 1983).

What can parents do?

- Foster a positive attitude toward the second language in your child and within your family. If you think the language you want your child to learn is too difficult, cannot be mastered, or has no value -- so will your child. Don't be intimidated into thinking you can't do it. Spread the excitement and the confidence that you and your child can learn.
- Start small and early with your child and have realistic goals. Are you going to master a language in 6 months working alone at home? Of course not, but you can help create a solid foundation for later formal instruction, reinforce what is happening in a classroom, or just generate an interest in another language and culture. Begin at the beginning with an age appropriate, graduated, sentence-based resource. Don't start with War & Peace and don't start with full-length feature movies.
- Create real life communication opportunities that are relevant, immediate and accessible to parent and child. Start with the familiar - utilize strategies that entail repetition & interaction within a meaningful context such as daily routines, weekly activities, favorite games & toys. Create

opportunities to introduce the new language and be consistent in using the new language in those contexts.

- Be creative - do a craft with your child to create a visual aid for vocabulary practice. Use games, activities, crafts as well as books to promote the development of listening and speaking skills. Make a scrapbook of all the important things in your life and use it as an opportunity to describe the pictures in the second language. Play a game in the second language instead of your first language. Even if the game is a simple counting game, you're creating an opportunity to use the second language.

- Learn the language as a family and make it fun. Children and adults need consistent & continuous exposure as well as a reliable context (Fantini personal communication). Create special and frequent opportunities just for the second language - such as starting a language-based playgroup.

- Skip the grammar and the rules. Don't sweat the mistakes and the words you don't know. You don't have to be fluent, perfect, or proficient to help your child begin. Recognize that mistakes are ok and that learning is a process. Keep the flow of conversation going in a mix of languages if you need to. You will notice that your child mixes languages. This is ok and expected. Children growing up in bilingual households don't start separating languages till age 2  $\frac{1}{2}$ -3, but don't sweat it if your child is 12 or 13 either. By starting small you will build the foundation for more and more meaningful vocabulary to become part of your family repertoire.

- Focus on the development of listening skills first
- Once you start to recognize words and patterns, incorporate them into your speech
- Save reading & writing for steps 3 & 4 (last)
- Repetition & frequency are key

- Utilize multimedia resources that incorporate the voices of native speakers in a conversational sentence-based format as your core materials. Seek diverse and varied materials to expose your family to a second language. One medium isn't going to be the sole answer to your needs.

- 10 minutes a day or 15 minutes every other day for "formal" language

learning is a good beginning (by formal- we mean sitting down with a multimedia product - remember you need to prioritize listening comprehension skills first)

- Finally, don't make language learning punitive. Forcing your child to learn a second language won't make your child value the language or culture.

- To sum up language is social Becoming bilingual is an intrinsically social, psychological as well as linguistic process (Baker 2001). A positive attitude directly influences the motivation of the parent and the child.

- Remember, as in everything else you do, you as parents make the difference in your child's life.

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