

RAISING A BILINGUAL CHILD: RESOURCES AND ANSWERS TO COMMON QUESTIONS

Isabelle Berten, Dongxia Nie, Dr Catherine Hamilton,
& Dr Faidra Faitaki



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RAISING A BILINGUAL CHILD: ANSWERS TO SOME COMMON QUESTIONS

What is the current recommendation on whether you should raise a child bilingually?

Current guidance recommends that parents use the language(s) they feel most comfortable speaking with their children. In general, there is no reason to stop speaking your home language to your child because they are learning another language.¹

There is no one correct way to raise a bilingual child. What works for your family may not work for another, and you do not need to strictly speak only one language to your child or follow a particular bilingual parenting strategy perfectly.² What matters is giving children regular opportunities to hear and use their languages through meaningful interactions. Talk to your child about everyday life, tell stories, play together, sing songs, read books and involve them in conversations with relatives and other speakers of the language.³

Children are capable of learning more than one language, and growing up bilingually does not confuse children or cause speech or language problems.⁴ Bilingual children's language development can sometimes look different from that of monolingual children.⁵ For example, children may use sounds or words from one language when speaking the other, and some may initially appear to be behind their monolingual peers in school. As children age and gain more experience using both languages, they generally become better at keeping their languages separate, and gaps between monolingual and bilingual children tend to narrow.⁶ There is no evidence that children need to give up their home language in order to learn English successfully.

What can I do if I'm not sure my child has understood what I've said?

Encourage your child to let you know if they haven't understood what you've said to them. You can plan out a response to this scenario as a family. Having options in mind ahead of time can help you respond to these situations when they arise.

If you are unsure whether your child has understood you, you can:

- Use context or gestures, such as pointing, miming, or using pictures.
- Rephrase what you've said with more familiar words or simpler sentence structures.
- Repeat or explain an unfamiliar word while keeping the rest of the sentence in the original language.
- Check their understanding by asking them to show you something or respond to what you've said, rather than asking, "Do you understand me?"

If your child is still struggling to understand you, it is okay to use another language to help them. Recent research suggests that you do not need to keep both languages completely separate in order for your children to learn both of their languages successfully.⁷

What can I do if my child doesn't want to answer in the home language? How much should I push them?

Remember that speaking and listening are different skills. Children often understand more of a language than they are able to produce.⁸ Answering you in another language does not necessarily mean that they don't appreciate their additional language(s) or wish to learn and speak them.

If your child regularly avoids answering in the home language, it can be helpful to try and find out why. You can ask them how they feel about the language and if anything might make it easier for them. Involve your child in trying to think of solutions for your family together.

Encourage your child to answer you in the home language while keeping things positive.⁹ You can:

- Repeat what your child has said in the home language and see if this leads them to switch back.
- Help your child by giving them a word or the start of a sentence when they get stuck, or give them more time to answer you.
- Limit corrections and interruptions, and try to expand on their answers rather than correct every mistake.

- Tie language use to specific routines (bedtime, bathtime, school run, etc.) to make its use more predictable.
- Try using games, silly voices, and playful repetition to give children opportunities to use the language without making speaking it feel like a test.¹⁰
- Help your child develop positive feelings about their home language and culture by talking about why the language matters to your family.¹¹

If encouraging your child to speak is creating tension or conflict in the family, prioritise your family well-being. Maintaining your language matters, but so do positive communication and relationships.¹²

Lastly, language development is not always straightforward, and children's (and parents'!) use of their languages can change as they grow.¹³ If your child goes through a period of using one of their languages less, this does not mean that you have missed out on your only opportunity to teach them your language(s). Research suggests that early exposure to a language can leave children with lasting advantages even if they stop speaking the language for a period of time,¹⁴ and that children can return to speaking a language after taking a break.¹⁵ Keeping the language present in positive ways can leave the door open for your children to return to it when they are ready. This does not mean that taking a break has no effect, but language learning is not "now or never."

Is supplementary school worth it? Would my child have the same language outcomes without it?

Unfortunately, there is limited research looking into the effects of supplementary language programmes, so there isn't a simple answer to this question.¹⁶ It is also important to keep in mind that not all supplementary or Saturday schools are the same. Programmes can vary in how often children attend and what they are taught. This means that the experience and potential benefits may vary from one programme to another.

What we do know is that supplementary school is only one part of a child's language development. Everyday exposure to language is important for development, and attending supplementary school alone has not been shown to lead to stronger spoken language skills.¹⁷

However, supplementary school can provide opportunities for language learning that may be harder to find elsewhere. Attending supplementary school has been shown to support children in learning to read and write in their additional language(s).¹⁸ Additionally, supplementary schools can also provide opportunities for children to learn about their culture,¹⁹ strengthen their sense of identity,²⁰ and meet other children from their language community.

There is no evidence that every child needs to attend supplementary school in order to maintain their language, but there is evidence suggesting it can offer important benefits. When deciding whether supplementary school is right for your family, it may help to consider what you hope your child will get from the experience.

Is all of this work worth it? Am I asking too much of my children or making life too hard for them?

Raising bilingual children can take time and effort, and many parents wonder whether they are doing the right thing or how best to support their children. Research suggests that it is worth it to teach your child your language(s) as speaking the family language can have important benefits for children's well-being.²¹ It can help with their sense of identity and connection to their culture,²² and can strengthen their relationships with family members.²³

Children do not need to become "perfect" bilinguals to experience these benefits. It is completely normal for a bilingual child to be stronger in one language than another.²⁴

It is also okay to acknowledge that maintaining multiple languages can sometimes be difficult. Our own research suggests that children can be aware of these difficulties and still value being bilingual. Something being difficult does not mean that it isn't valuable, and you can explain this to your children.



Additional Resources:

- [Bilingual Families: A Practical Language Planning Guide – Eowyn Crisfield](#)
- [A Parents’ and Teachers’ Guide to Bilingualism – Colin Baker](#)
- [National Literacy Trust Bilingual Quick Tips](#)
- [Bilingualism Matters](#)
- [Kletsheads](#) Podcast
- Episodes 20 & 21 of [The Language Revolution](#)
- Babel Babies [[YouTube](#)] [[Spotify](#)]

¹ American Academy of Pediatrics, & American Speech-Language-Hearing Association. (2025, November 20). *Young children learning multiple languages: Parent FAQs*. HealthyChildren.org. <https://www.healthychildren.org/English/ages-stages/gradeschool/school/Pages/7-Myths-Facts-Bilingual-Children-Learning-Language.aspx> ; NHS. (2023, April 26). *Help your baby learn to talk*. <https://www.nhs.uk/baby/babys-development/play-and-learning/help-your-baby-learn-to-talk/>

² Byers-Heinlein, K., & Lew-Williams, C. (2013). Bilingualism in the early years: What the science says. *LEARNing landscapes*, 7(1), 95–112. <https://doi.org/10.36510/learnland.v7i1.632> ; Temkin, A. (n.d.). *The experts’ guide to raising a bilingual child*. The Times. <https://www.thetimes.com/life-style/parenting/article/parenting-guide-raising-bilingual-child-t9pv6xg8l>

³ Communication Health Support Association. (n.d.). *Learning more than one language*. <https://helpingyoucommunicate.org/article/learning-more-than-one-language> ; Paradis, J. (2023). Sources of individual differences in the dual language development of heritage bilinguals. *Journal of Child Language*, 50(4), 793–817. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0305000922000708>

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⁵ Hoff E. (2023). Commonalities, differences, and differences that matter between monolingual and bilingual development. *Journal of child language*, 50(4), 818–822. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0305000922000770>

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⁷ Paquette, A., & Byers-Heinlein, K. (2025). Parental language mixing in Montreal: Rates, predictors, and relation to infants’ vocabulary size. *Behavioral Sciences*, 15(10), Article 1371. <https://doi.org/10.3390/bs15101371> ; Verhoeven, E., van Witteloostuijn, M., Oudgenoeg-Paz, O., & Blom, E. (2026). To mix or not to mix? The relation between parental language mixing and bilingual children’s language outcomes. *Bilingualism*, 29(2), 475–489. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1366728925100175>

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What did we learn from our study?

We spoke with 10 children and 10 parents from 8 different bi-/multilingual families living in the US and the UK to learn more about their experiences. Children were aged 7–11, and spoke 8 different languages in addition to English: Dutch, French, German, Greek, Hindi, Russian, Swiss German, and Telugu.

Here are some of the things we learned:

Both parents and children valued bilingualism – but sometimes for different reasons.

Overall, both the parents and children we spoke to felt positively about bilingualism and using their languages. However, while parents often focused on both the current and future benefits bilingualism could offer, children appeared to focus more on its benefits in their lives now.

In particular, children tended to emphasise the ability to communicate with more people. This suggests that having opportunities to use their languages outside of the family may be particularly meaningful to them.

For children, being bilingual can be valuable and challenging at the same time.

Children spoke positively about being bilingual, but they also shared that they could feel frustrated with some aspects of using their languages, like comprehension or supplementary schooling.

These two experiences can exist together. A child can value being bilingual while also finding parts of learning and using their languages challenging.

Recognising these challenges does not mean that bilingualism has failed, or that a child does not appreciate being bilingual. Instead, listening to what children find difficult may help families find ways of supporting their languages that work better for them.

Maintaining a language is something families navigate together.

From the experiences shared in our study and those from previous studies, it is clear that maintaining a language is not something parents do alone. Bilingualism is better understood as an ongoing process that parents and children navigate together, and there is no single way that bilingual family life should look.

Thank you again for taking part in our study!

Being Bilingual

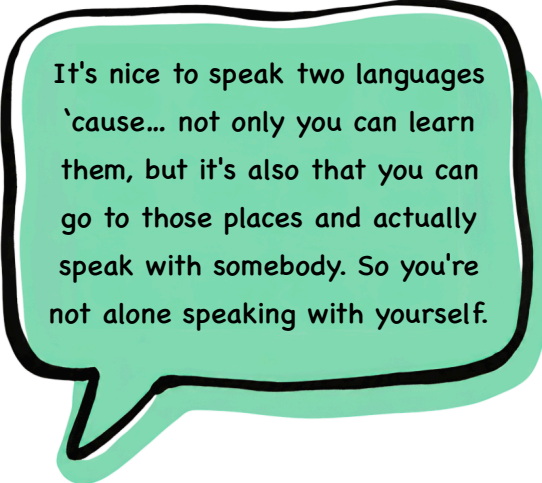
Being bilingual means knowing two languages – and there are lots of bilingual people in the world, just like you! In fact, researchers think that about half of the world's population is bilingual or multilingual. That's over 4 billion people!

Some people are multilingual, which means they know 3, 4, or even 5 or more languages. There is no limit to the number of languages you can learn.

There are lots of different ways to be bilingual. You might speak one language at school and one at home. You might speak one language more than another. You might understand a language but find it a bit trickier to speak it. Your languages can change as you grow older, too. All of these are ways of being bilingual!

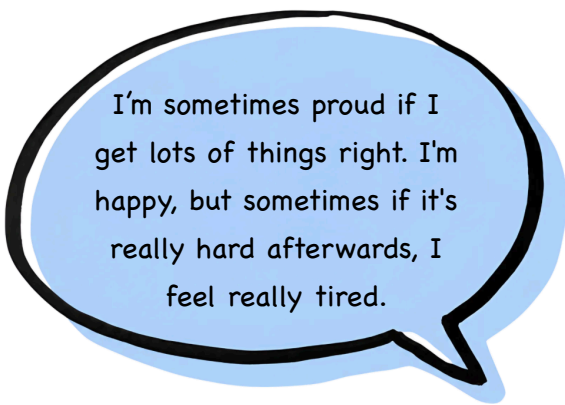
How does it feel to be bilingual?

Some children really like speaking two languages. They like being able to talk to more people, or visit a different country and speak to people who live there. Sometimes your languages might even feel like a secret language!



It's nice to speak two languages 'cause... not only you can learn them, but it's also that you can go to those places and actually speak with somebody. So you're not alone speaking with yourself.

But being bilingual isn't always easy. Sometimes you might find it difficult to understand what someone's said, or you might know how to say something in one language but not another. Learning to read and write in another language or going to language school can be hard work, too.



I'm sometimes proud if I get lots of things right. I'm happy, but sometimes if it's really hard afterwards, I feel really tired.

You might feel some of these things, too. Or you might feel completely differently, and that's okay! You can like being bilingual and still find parts of it difficult. You can feel proud of your languages sometimes and frustrated at other times. Most importantly, what you think about your languages matters.

What do you think?

My languages are:

Something I like about knowing my languages is:

Something I find tricky about knowing my languages is:

Something I'd like my family to know is: