

a short guide to
**Raising Children
Bilingually**

Fred Genesee, McGill University

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This guide will get you moving in the
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All children learn at least one language.

Many children around the world learn more than one language and they do this in different ways. Some children learn two, or more, languages from birth. Other children begin to learn a second language when they go to daycare or preschool and an increasing number of children learn a second language in immersion programs when they start school. In this article, I focus on children who learn two languages from birth, or shortly after birth. I focus on children who learn two languages and do not comment on children who learn more than two. In other words, I focus on children who have two first languages.

Learning two languages from birth occurs when parents speak different languages and decide to use their different languages to raise their child. In other families, the parents may speak the same language, but it is different from the language used in the community at large; for example, Spanish- or Chinese-speaking parents in the U.S. These parents might decide to use only Spanish or only Chinese at home while the child is exposed to English with most people they encounter outside the home. In yet other cases, children may be under the care of caregivers who speak a language that is different from that of their parents; for example, English-speaking parents in New York City who employ Spanish-speaking nannies to care for their child during the day while the parents are at work. Or, the source of the other language might be grandparents who speak a heritage language that is not spoken widely in the child's community. Raising children bilingually raises lots of questions. I have tried to answer some of those questions below. It is important to emphasize that my suggestions below are very general and do not necessarily apply to all situations for all parents and children. Ultimately, each family must make the best decisions for themselves. The comments that follow do not concern cases where children are learning one language at home and another language in school. This is another topic.









1. Is it a good idea to raise my child bilingually?

There are many good reasons for raising children bilingually. First and foremost are personal and family reasons. If members of the immediate family or extended family include people who speak other languages, then it is a benefit for everyone if your child speaks their languages. This is especially true if some family members speak only one language and might be cut off from communication with your child if he/she does not learn their language.

The advantages of being bilingual or multilingual go beyond the family. Research has shown that children who are fluent in two languages also have cognitive advantages in comparison to those who speak only one language. For example, they are better at solving problems that involve focusing on relevant information while ignoring irrelevant information. Even bilinguals who are 60 or 70 years of age demonstrate these kinds of advantages.

Clearly, there are also advantages that come from knowing other languages when you child is old enough to read and write and use computers. There is a wealth of information available in print, electronic and other media nowadays. The potential for accessing all that information is much greater for those who know more than one language and are limited for those who know only one. Of course, knowing a language like English is important because it is the most widely used second language in the world. It is widely used for communication about science, politics, financial matters, education, and other topics, and is used extensively on the internet as well as in print and on radio, television, and so on. People who speak additional languages along with English have access to many more of these sources of information than those who know only English.

Finally, there are many personal advantages from knowing additional languages. There are lots of job opportunities in international businesses and governments that require competence in two or more languages. Large international businesses need well educated bilinguals to work in the global market place; governments need multilinguals who can work in embassies and government offices around the world; and many other sectors of the economy (such as education, science) have job opportunities for those who are bilingual. Travel opportunities are also much greater for those who speak additional languages.

2. Is it normal for children to learn two languages at the same time?

Based on the number of children around the world who are raised speaking more than one language, bilingual acquisition is probably more “normal” than monolingualism. It has been estimated that there may be more children who grow up learning two or more languages than children who learn only one. More importantly, there is no scientific reason to think that young infants’ brains are equipped to learn only one language in early childhood. In fact, there has been a lot of research on infants and young children who are learning two languages from birth, and these studies show that children go through the same basic milestones in language acquisition as those who learn only one language. Bilingual children begin to babble at the same time as monolingual children; they say their first words at the same age as monolingual children; they start to produce multi-word sentences at the same time; and so on.

There are differences, of course, between bilingual and monolingual children. The learning task for bilinguals is much more complex and this sometimes may result in short delays or small differences in learning. For example, studies have found that 15 month old infants learning two languages may be delayed by 2 or 3 months in their ability to distinguish new words that that sound similar to each other (e.g., “bit” vs. “bet”) in comparison to monolingual children. But, in the long run, this short delay has an insignificant effect on bilingual children’s overall learning. In fact, researchers suggest that this delay may be helpful for children who hear and must learn words from two languages with different sounds and sounds. It is a kind of flexibility that leaves them open to the greater diversity of words in two languages than monolinguals hear in only one.

Bilinguals can differ from monolinguals even into adulthood – they may pronounce words in slightly different ways; they may use unusual words from time to time; or they may construct sentences in different ways at times. Simply put, bilinguals have more language skills at their disposal and they use them in ways that may distinguish them from people who know only one language.

3. Will my child become confused if we use two languages in the home?

There is absolutely no evidence that children get confused when parents use both languages in the same sentence (or utterance) – what is referred to as code-mixing or code-switching. As long as most people in the child's family and community use only one language at a time, the child will learn that this is the appropriate way to use their two languages. There is a lot of research showing that even children in the earliest stages of bilingual development know how to use their languages separately, even with strangers they have never met before. If children are growing up in families and communities where two languages are often mixed in the same sentences or conversations, then, of course, children will learn these patterns of mixing. This makes sense because mixing is useful in their community. If the norm in the community in general, however, is to keep the languages separate, then children will learn and use this pattern.

4. Should I worry if my child mixes languages?

Mixing languages in the same sentences or conversations is perfectly normal – all bilinguals do it, even adults. This phenomenon has been studied extensively in children and adults. Research on children has shown that most bilingual children keep their languages separate most of the time. When they mix it is often to fill in gaps in their vocabulary in one or the other language. Bilingual children rarely know exactly the same words in both languages and, as a result, they might use a word from one language while speaking the other language because they do not know the word in the language they are using. Sometimes bilingual children mix words in their two languages because there are specific concepts or meanings that can be expressed easily in one language but not the other. If a child wants to express that meaning or concept, she will have to use the word from the language that it belongs to even if it means mixing languages. In most cases, this strategy works because often the adults in the child's life know both languages too. As bilingual children get older, they mix in order to express their bilingual identity when they are with other bilinguals. Bilingual adolescents and adults often mix with other bilinguals because it is who they are. In the same way, people who speak specific dialects of a language will use that dialect with others who speak it in order to express their common identity. Mixing does not mean that children are confused or impaired; they are simply using all of their language resources to express themselves.

Yet other research on code-mixing by children has shown that even their mixed sentences are grammatically correct most of the time. For example, if a child inserts a word from one language saying something in the other language, he will insert the word in a place in the sentence that is grammatically correct according to both languages. Or if a child switches from one language to the other partway through a sentence, she will do it at a point in the sentence

do not break the grammatical rules of either language when they mix languages. This is also true of adult bilinguals.

5. Will my child's language learning be delayed because he/she has to cope with two languages at the same time?

Research shows that bilingual children go through most of the major milestones in language development – babbling, first words, and grammatical development, at the same age as monolingual children, IF THEY ARE GIVEN ADEQUATE EXPOSURE TO BOTH LANGUAGES. Research indicates that when children divide their learning time equally between their two languages – that is, 50% exposure to one language and 50% to the other, their two languages develop like that of monolingual children for the most part. However, bilingual children may show delayed or even incomplete development in one of their languages if their exposure to that language is too limited. It is clear that children learning two languages at the same time do not need as much exposure to each language as monolingual children get for their one. However, there is a minimum level of exposure below which the development of that can be delayed and incomplete. We do not have solid scientific evidence to tell us what that minimum amount of exposure is. Our best guess at this time is that bilingual children must be exposed to a language during at least 30% of their total language exposure if their acquisition of that language is to proceed normally. Less exposure than this could result in incomplete acquisition of that language.

It is common to find that the vocabulary of preschool bilingual children is less than that of monolingual children if you examine each language separately, even if the bilingual child's exposure to both languages is divided equally (50:50). However, if you examine their total vocabulary in **both** languages by counting all words for different concepts regardless of what language they are in, bilingual children have vocabularies that are the same size or even larger than those of monolingual children. Early differences in vocabulary between bilingual and monolingual children may be due to several factors, none of which are signs of deficit or impairment. For example, all children have limited memory capacities and, thus, all children initially have limited vocabularies. Because bilingual children must share their limited memory with two languages, they can store fewer words in each language than monolingual children, but the same number, or more words when you consider both languages. Another explanation of bilingual children's smaller vocabularies in each language is related to the learning environment. Many bilingual children do not have totally equivalent vocabularies in both languages because they often learn each language from different people and/or in different settings. If these people talk about different things, the child will learn vocabulary in each that is specific to what is being talked about. This can persist even into adulthood and represents a relatively minor problem for most bilinguals.

6. Will my child's grammar suffer?

As we have already seen, bilingual children who have adequate exposure to both languages exhibit the same pattern of grammatical development as monolingual children and they go through the various stages of grammatical development as monolingual children. They also can keep their two grammars separate so that they avoid using the grammar of one language while speaking the other language. Children who get too little exposure to one of their languages may not acquire complete grammatical competence in that language and, in these cases, they may use the grammar of their stronger language to express themselves in their weaker language. This is often the case for children who acquire a second language in school. Of course, the level of sophistication that children acquire in the grammar of each language will depend on the level of sophistication of the language that people around them use. This means that it is a good idea for parents, other caregivers, educators, and others in the community to provide enriched as well as continuous exposure in each language.

7. Should we use the one-parent, one-language (OP/OL) rule in our home?

Parents are often told that they should use the one-parent, one-language rule in the home because it ensures that their children will not get confused by hearing their parents use both languages at the same time. There is no evidence that following this rule helps children keep their two languages separate. As was said before, as long as most people in the child's life use only one language at a time, the child will also learn to keep their two languages separate. The one-parent, one-language rule is a useful strategy for parents to use with their children to ensure that their children get adequate exposure to both languages; otherwise, there might be a tendency to favor one language over the other. The OP/OL rule helps to make sure that this does not happen.

In some families, the OP/OL rule may not be the best strategy. For example, if one of the languages the child is learning is not spoken by anyone outside the family, then it may be a good idea for both parents to use only that language. This will ensure that the child gets sufficient exposure to it to acquire it well. If children go to daycares or pre-schools where the societally-dominant language is used or of if they have neighborhood friends who speak the societal language, they will get lots of exposure to the societal language. As a result, they will most certainly acquire full competence in that language because everyone around them uses it. Emphasizing the non-societal language in the home may be the best strategy to adopt in families that speak a minority language that is not widely used outside the home.

8. What about children with language impairment? Is it a good idea for them to learn two languages at the same time?

Children with language impairment are children who have difficulty acquiring the vocabulary, grammar and conversational skills of language in comparison to typically developing children. These children's learning difficulty is restricted to language learning because they usually have normal cognitive development, no obvious neurological impairments, and normal socio-emotional and perceptual development. Children with language impairment often experience difficulty and even failure in school because the linguistic demands in school are too great. It is commonly thought that children with language impairment should only learn one language because learning two exceeds their language learning capacity and could result in even greater impairments and delays.

We do not have as much research on children with language impairment who are raised bilingually as we would like. However, the research evidence that we do have suggests that children with language impairment can become learn and use two languages fluently despite their impairment. They exhibit language impairments in both languages, but their impairments



are of the same nature and magnitude as those of monolingual children with impairment. At the same time, they develop proficiency in two languages. At present, there is no scientific evidence to suggest that children with language impairment should be limited to only one language on the grounds that this will facilitate their language learning and avoid language difficulties. Raising children with language impairment bilingually is especially important in families and communities where knowing two languages is important and where not knowing one of the languages would restrict the child's interactions with other family members or with members of their community.

9. Are there circumstances when raising children bilingually is not a good idea?

It may not be a good idea to raise children bilingually if parents cannot provide the learning environment that is needed to support the development of both languages. For example, take a family for whom English is the dominant language of both parents and they live in a community where another language is spoken. If they are living in this community for only a short period of time because one of the parents has a short-term job placement there, it may not be worthwhile for the child to learn the new language since they will not have enough exposure to the language to really learn it. Recall that children need long term exposure to language if they are to develop full competence.

In a related vein, raising children bilingually may not be advisable if exposure to one of the languages is going to be interrupted or inconsistent – because the family moves a lot or because of changes in the composition of the family that will result in a loss of someone who is the primary speaker of that language. Young children often react badly to inconsistent or irregular exposure to language; they like consistency. Thus, if parents decide to raise their child bilingually, they should do so only if they can provide continuous and extended exposure to both languages.

Also, it may not be a good idea to raise children bilingually if at least one parent or child caregiver in the family does not speak each language fluently. In such cases, the parents may lack sufficient competence to provide the enriched language exposure the child needs to develop full competence. If there is a child caregiver who can supplement the parents' use of their weaker language and if that caregiver is with the child for sufficient periods of time during the week, then the parent's incomplete competence in the language may not be so serious.

In sum, it is not a good idea to start raising children bilingually if you cannot keep it going or if you lack the linguistic competence yourself to nurture your child's language development. This caution does not apply to children who are attending bilingual or immersion programs where a second language is used for instruction for an extended period of time. These programs are very effective ways of helping your children become bilingual.

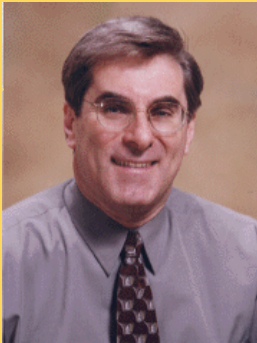
10. What do I need to do to make sure my child will learn both languages fully?

As we have seen, learning two languages in infancy and early childhood is as natural as learning only one language. Young children have the capacity to acquire full competence in two languages. While this is true, it is also true that the level of competence and the range of competencies that children acquire in each of their two languages depend critically on the learning environment. Children need continuous, sustained, and enriched exposure to both languages if they are to acquire full competence in both. Parents must take whatever steps they need to ensure that their child is actively exposed to both languages preferably on a daily basis for a sustained and continuous time period. Active exposure means that children not only hear other people using each language, but they are actively involved in using each language. Children with only passive exposure to language, by overhearing adults for example, or watching TV, will not develop the ability to use the language proficiently. If children are to develop competence expressing themselves in two languages, they must be actively engaged in using both languages with others who know those languages.

Motivating children to use both languages can sometimes be the biggest challenge in raising children bilingually. This is especially true when it comes to using a language that is not used widely outside the home. Often young children prefer to use the language that other children around them are using and they may



hesitate to use the “family” language if it is not used by their friends. In these cases, parents must devise strategies to motivate their child to use the language – for example, by creating playgroups with other children who speak the language or by visiting relatives who speak the language. Otherwise, the child may not see the value in using it and may even feel embarrassed using it. Parents should not be discouraged if children do not use both languages early in development. Some children, even monolingual children, take longer to get started and are not as vocal as other children. It does not mean that switching to only one language is advisable. Patience and effort will pay off when children grow up and have the benefits of being bilingual.



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research interests include the language and literacy development of at-risk students in bilingual programs, language development in cross-language adopted children, and simultaneous bilinguals.

Further reading suggestions:

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