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Bilingual Children and Speech Quest

A child who has the opportunity to learn more than one language in their natural home environment could be considered fortunate as it appears that the facility to learn languages improves the more that you learn. In addition there may be valuable insights into other languages and cultures, and of course for the child him/herself, the ability to communicate with grandparents, and maintain strong links with relatives and family friends in the family language. And, longer term, there are definite advantages to being bilingual in the workplace. In fact, the majority of the world's population is at least bilingual, and surprisingly, there are 30 times more languages than countries in the world.

The languages that children learn should be those which the parents speak naturally as their own mother tongue or first language. The usual advice given to parents able to bring their children up bilingually, is to each speak your own first language when you communicate with the child, so that the child becomes accustomed to using that language with that parent, and speaks the other language with the other parent. There may be a dominant language in the household for the whole family, and there are likely to be a variety of family expressions and special words which are adopted within the conversation, whichever language is being spoken.

For a child growing up in a mono-lingual household who is schooled in another language, there is no reason why the child will not be able to pick up the school language and in time be perfectly fluent. This is likely to be far easier for younger children, since the brain of a child younger than 7 years is predisposed to learning language.

Children who grow up in a bilingual household have as much chance of speech and language difficulties as the rest of the population. The difficulties are likely to affect both languages. It is estimated that 1 in 10 children has a specific speech and language difficulty. If you are concerned that your child is slow in picking up any of the languages used around him/her, do the Speech Quest assessment on line. Make sure that you consider your child's progress in both languages as you answer the Speech Quest questions that relate to language acquisition. Speech Quest will then feedback the assessment results to you, and will give you advice on how to help your child and useful activities. Speech Quest may also recommend a referral to the local speech and language therapy service.

Frequently Asked Questions

1. Our home language is not English, but my child goes to a pre-school playgroup and a child minder who only speak English with him. Should I be concerned?

Answer: There should be no cause for concern in this case. However, it is important that those who work with your child are fully aware that he may not always understand what is being said to him because he speaks a different language at home. They need to make a special effort to ensure he does understand, such as by demonstrating to him, showing him, using photographs, pictures, gestures and basic signing to help where necessary, and being patient with him. They should not

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expect him to speak English for some time. This could be as long as a year, or in some cases longer, though his understanding should develop quicker.

If you have any concerns about the way he is learning his home language, then it is important to follow this up with your health visitor, or GP. It would be helpful to use Speech Quest's assessment (adapting to your own language) and to get our results so that you can have a better idea whether there may be a problem.

2. My husband speaks English as his first language but I am not fluent in English, because I speak another language. How should I help my child to learn each language?

Answer: Your child is fortunate to have the opportunity to learn two languages equally. Experts advise that you speak to your child in your own mother tongue or first language. So in your case you will speak your first language to your child and your husband will speak his first language, English, to him. Your child should develop both languages at more or less the same rate, over time, though the language that is used most with your child is likely to be picked up slightly more easily. Being bilingual does not cause language learning problems. Your child is likely to select the right language to use with each of you, which is called "code-switching" and is perfectly natural. You are likely to have some words which will always be spoken using one language if there is not an obvious translation.

3. At home we speak English and French, because my husband is a French native speaker. Our child is not picking up either language and we are concerned. What should we do?

Answer: It is important to get a referral to your speech and language therapy service. While you wait for the appointment, it is worth carrying out the Speech Quest assessment and follow up with the activities we recommend. Take the assessment information we provide to your SLT service as this will be helpful for the therapist. The Speech Quest activities will not harm your child, but should help your child make some progress in the meantime. Unless you are fluent in each others' languages, it is generally agreed best to use your own language with your child, and for your husband to use his own language with your child, so that your child is hearing good adult models of both languages.

4. My child is being raised bilingually but is struggling in both languages. I have completed the Speech Quest assessment which recommends that I seek advice through a referral to the local speech and language therapy service. What should I expect from them?

Answer: The SLT service should first of all find out about the home language/s you use, and arrange to have an interpreter present for the assessment session so that your child may be assessed in both languages. This may be a bilingual speech and language therapy co-worker if they are fluent in your home language. This is really important because the therapist will need to find out whether both languages are equally affected, and will need to ask you questions about your child's use of both

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languages in a variety of contexts, and to find out more about your home language, such as the sounds your child needs to learn. There may be cultural differences that the therapist will need to know also. It is very important to give the correct name of the home language, rather than a general name, even if you think the therapist will not have heard of it, so that no time is wasted by arranging an interpreter who does not speak the particular “dialect”, for example.

As both languages will need to be assessed, the assessment session may last quite a long time, or it may be run over more than one session, especially if your child is tired.

In other ways, the assessment will be much the same as for a child with only one language. Your child will be given opportunities to play during the session, and this forms part of the assessment, but is also to help put your child at ease. The therapist will ask questions about your family and will want to know about your child’s birth and early history, illnesses and periods away from home, as well as any issues that may be having an impact on your child’s development.

Remember, bilingualism does not cause speech and language difficulties in children, so if you believe your bilingual child is not developing language skills like other children, it is important to have this checked out. At Speech Quest we can help you take this first step, if you check your child’s progress with our [Online Questionnaire](#). We will feed back instantly a summary of the assessment results, and some basic advice. For more detail you will need to join. Once you joined Speech Quest, we also give you specially designed activities to follow with your child to help their language skills develop.