

What Parents Want to Know About Raising Their Children Bilingually

by Dr Susanne Döpke

In the 15 years of advising and supporting parents in raising their children bilingually, I have helped many families achieve their dream and gain the approval of relatives, friends, and professionals working with their bilingual children. Let me share with you some of the most frequently asked questions.

Is bilingualism possible?

In Australia, many families have been successfully raising their children with another language parallel to English. In many of these families, only one of the parents speaks the language-other-than-English (=LOTE). In some cases this parent is even in full-time employment (myself being one of them!). The key to success lies in the consistency of language use by the parent, the quality of interaction between parent and child, and the creation of a need for the child to speak the LOTE.

With consistency I mean establishing a firm habit of ALWAYS speaking the LOTE with your child so that you provide the maximum input you possibly can. The quality of input is raised when you spend fun times playing with your child and choosing your words and sentence structures so that your child can learn from your talk. If you do this, your child will always understand what you say and his or her understanding will automatically grow as the child grows. A need to speak the LOTE is created when you don't let your child get away with responding in English, just like a grandmother monolingual in the LOTE would not be able to do. Detailed descriptions of such strategies are given in the "Australian Newsletter for Bilingual Families" as well as during my seminars for parents.

Is being bilingual good for my child?

The last 40 years have produced a wealth of research data showing that bilingual children are in no way disadvantaged. In many areas they seem to do even better than their monolingual peers. This is particularly the case on tests relating to metalinguistic awareness. Metalinguistic refers to the knowledge people have *about* language, which goes beyond simply using it. Metalinguistic awareness is an important factor in learning to read. The rea-

son for bilingual children doing well in these areas seems to lie in their understanding at a very early age that language is relative and flexible and can be used to manipulate people and situations. Children as young as two years of age understand that they have to use a different word to mum than to dad when they want a drink. The most stable advantages for bilingual children have been found with respect to conscious control over unconscious reactions in laboratory tests designed for this purpose. We are still only at the beginning of this research and have a long way to go in understanding enough about bilingualism to ask the most crucial research question. So far the results look good.

Will my child get confused?

The child will learn what is offered. If the bilingual adults closest to the child consistently use only one language with the child, then the child will associate



the language with that person and learn the correct words and structures for that language. If the adults mix their languages, then the child will learn a mixed code. The young child has no way of telling the languages apart until after s/he has acquired a fair amount of that language. At times young children will mix words or structures from one language into the other even though they receive consistent input. Usually this happens when sounds, words or structures in one language are easier or more frequent than in the other. This is a normal part of language acquisition. Monolingual children, too, learn what is easy and frequent first. If parents and other close adults continue to be consistent and facilitate the language acquisition, such mixing will remain transient.

Will my child be talking late?

Research shows that bilingual children start saying their first words and begin putting words together at much the same ages as do monolingual children. What's normal development at this

stage is very wide, and bilingual children fall comfortably within that range. Bilingual children might, however, be a little slower than monolingual children with respect to some complex or infrequent structures. This might be due to structures being similar but not identical in the two languages. It might take some children additional time to work out how far the similarity goes and where the difference begins. This is not indicative of cognitive difficulties the child may have with language learning, but a reflection of the complexity of the system to be acquired. It is not unlike, for example, questions being more complex in some languages than in others. Monolingual children of such languages would master questions at different ages as well. Parents can support their children by increasing the frequency of such structures in their own talk and by highlighting the differences. Once worked out, this adds much to the child's cognition.

What should be done when the child develops a language disorder?

There is no research supporting the notion still held by many lay people and professionals alike that dropping one of the languages will improve the child's ability to talk the other. Roughly 10% of children have difficulties acquiring language. This affects bilingual and monolingual children in the same way. If a child has a language disorder, the family needs to get professional help. If you suspect this for your child, please do see a speech pathologist. Many speech pathologists understand the issues involved in bilingualism and can support both languages of a child. The Multicultural Interest Group of Speech Pathology Australia might be able to direct you to a speech pathologist who speaks your LOTE, but well informed speech pathologists who do not speak your LOTE can help as well. If you are uncomfortable with the advice you are getting, it is your right to find another person to treat your child.

For ongoing support and a wealth of information for bilingual families, **Bilingual Options** offer the "Australian Newsletter for Bilingual Families" for subscription. For more information on the content of the ANBF and how to subscribe to it, go to:

<http://www.bilingualoptions.com.au/consANBF.htm>

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