

One child - two languages

Information, suggestions and tips for parents

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IS MULTILINGUALISM A PROBLEM OR A CHANCE FOR OUR CHILDREN?

Learning two different languages in the first stages of a child's life is a very good foundation to be more successful in school and later on the job. Therefore, the multilingualism is a chance and an enrichment for your child. On the other side, learning a second language is also a challenge. It often happens that children don't learn the second language as perfectly as their mother-tongue. The following advice should help you to successfully accomplish the challenges of a multilingual education.

IN WHICH LANGUAGE SHOULD WE TALK TO OUR CHILD?

While talking to your child, use the language which you are able to talk best - in most cases that would be the language you grew up with. It is not true that it is better for your child's language development if the parents are trying to talk German to them. Even if mother and father are talking different languages, a child is able to manage this. It is important to make arrangements in which language you are going to talk to your child. Be consistent in using that language so your child knows: With my mother I am talking this language, with my father I am talking the other language...

ARE THERE ANY MAJOR DIFFICULTIES IN LEARNING TO TALK IN A SECOND LANGUAGE?

Often parents are afraid that their child won't learn any of the languages properly. But it is possible for children to learn how to talk in two, sometimes three, different languages, as long as they are being encouraged to talk in those languages and to use those languages regularly.

A child who is raised in more languages may start speaking the first words or phrases later than others, but this is irrelevant for the further development. It can happen that the child is mixing up both languages, because words and grammatical forms of the one language are being replaced by the other language. This language-mix will disappear as soon as the child is able to speak both languages perfectly. Then the child can separate and differ between both languages. If children are learning a second language in a later stage of their life, this language-mix will last

longer, because it is more likely that children carry characteristics of the one language to the other one (for example: pronunciation).

HOW CAN WE ENCOURAGE OUR CHILD IN LEARNING TWO LANGUAGES?

It is very important to be able to talk in German for children who are getting raised here. A good knowledge of a language is a necessary foundation for being more successful in school or later in the working life. You as parents can help to create this foundation by allowing your child to listen to and talk in the German language. Associating with German-speaking parents or children (for example in the day care center) will help a lot. Therefore it is very important for your child to attend day care and learn German that way. The later your child will learn to speak German, the more difficulties it will have. In no case should your child wait until it starts school to learn the German language.

Parents are big role-models for their children. It is very important for your child to know that you appreciate both languages in equal measure. You can show your pride for your mothertongue by using it when talking in your family. On the other hand you should point out the importance of multilingualism. Children are highly motivated if they see that also their parents are making efforts in using the German language (for example by attending a German class or by asking your child for a specific word in German). Is there a more beautiful confirmation to let your child know it is going the right way?

WHAT CAN WE DO IN OUR DAILY-LIFE FOR OUR CHILD'S LANGUAGE-DEVELOPMENT?

It is within the family when children are learning to speak their first language. This happens completely naturally, without studying any grammatical rules or words. The more you are talking with your child and are encouraging it to talk itself, the better its language-development will be. With time, your child is going to learn to word its ideas and thoughts.

There are a lot of opportunities for linguistic interchange: Let your child tell you about its experiences, look at picture-books together as often as possible, tell your child about your work, about your experiences, about your own childhood, about your daily-life, tell your child fairy-tales... the more often, the better! That way you will encourage your child's development and its language-acquirement.

One more thing: Watching television is not the best way to help your child learn a language because children are looking at the pictures most of the times and won't concentrate on what is said. Listening to fairy-tale-CDs or fiction-stories on CD is a far more efficient way!

WHAT SHOULD WE DO IF OUR CHILD ONLY WANTS TO TALK IN ONE LANGUAGE ALL OF A SUDDEN?

Sometimes it can occur, that a child is only using one language - for example it is also talking German at home although the parents are talking in another family-language. This is nothing unusual: Continue using your existing language-habits and keep on talking in your mothertongue as a family-language. Your child's language-skills will persist and often they are willing to use their family-language at home again later.

You can also think of the other way round: A child is denying to use the German language or it doesn't make any efforts in learning it. In this case, the parents should ask themselves what they think about multilingualism for themselves and how they think about the German language itself. Reason for denying the German language can often be a non-encouragement by parents for learning the German language.

WHAT ARE LANGUAGE-DEVELOPMENT-DISORDERS?

If a child's language-ability in its mother-tongue varies highly from others contemporaries, a language-development-disorder could exist which requires a medical clarification and a therapeutic treatment.

If your child has language-disorders or delayed development in German as the second language, this is not a sign of a development-disorder. It rather shows that your child hasn't had enough contact with the German language. In this case you should encourage your child to have more German-speaking friends or you should look into special needs for German.