

Lost in Translation

Should you be more worried about **encouraging multilingualism** at home?



➔ Expat children in Shanghai grow up exposed to at least two languages: Chinese and whatever their parents speak. Most people easily rattle off the advantages of multilingualism, but rarely do we think about possible detrimental effects. Can it cause confusion? Feelings of isolation? What about delays in language development? Is it realistic to expect that our children attain the same level of fluency as those growing up in a monolingual environment? These questions evoke possible consequences that can cloud the successful development of a multilingual child.

Scientific research has found that although multilingual children may know less vocabulary in any one language than their

monolingual peers, their combined vocabulary in all the languages they speak, will either match or exceed that of children with just one language. By using the proper tools and techniques to help supplement children's language development, parents can help their kids gain the benefits of multilingualism while safeguarding them against possible pitfalls.

Developmental Delays

According to Ellen Shuett, a speech therapist at Olivia's Place and the product of a multilingual upbringing herself, tells me that although it can slow down speech development initially (because there is simply more information to process), growing up in a multilingual envi-

ronment does not cause speech delays overall.

"Of course, we can't expect children growing up with several languages to speak them all perfectly," she says, "because one will always be dominant—the one they hear the most. Children should follow the developmental milestones of their dominant language. Any deviations from this should be discussed with a speech therapist." Guidelines on how children are expected to develop in any one language have been compiled by the Standing Liaison Committee of Speech and Language Therapists / Logopedists in the European Union (www.cplol.eu). According to these guidelines, by the end of the first year, children should be using single word instructions like "ball" or "mama".

By the end of the second year, children should begin to combine two words into simple sentences like "Mama bye-bye". By the end of the third year children should be using complete sentences that are relatively clear to non-family members, even if the grammar is not entirely there.

Mixed Identity

Can multilingualism cause feelings of confusion and lost identity in a child? "Not if the parents follow certain rules," says Nina Cheung, Educational Director and co-founder of the Sino-European International Preschool (SEIPS), a preschool specializing in bilingual instruction. She lays three simple guidelines:

First, be consistent. This means always using the same language with your child, even if they hear you speak other languages with different people at different times. "It enables them to make sense of what they hear," says Steve Sanderson, father of one and keen researcher in how language learning develops. Whereas adults file information in their heads based on the type of language (e.g. French, English or Spanish), children are best able to categorize this information based on the individual who speaks that language (e.g. "Mommy's language" or "Daddy's language"). Multilingualism is a reality for these children, even though they lack the words with which to define it.

Second, be natural. Speak to your child in the language that feels closest to your heart. "Language isn't just about grammar or vocabulary," says Schuett, "it's also about emotions, feelings and identity. Speaking to your child in a language you are not 100 percent comfortable with can introduce feelings of unease that a child, not understanding where it comes from, may attribute to the relationship instead of the awkward use of language," warns Sanderson.

Third, have fun. This means creating playdates and fun situations for a child to use his or her language skills. "Create a network of people and situations where your child(ren) can hear and speak the language(s) you want them to maintain," advises Schuett. This will also help ease the transition back to your home country, and strengthen their sense of

cultural identity and belonging."

When these rules are neglected, children are often not able to communicate as clearly and as effectively as their peers. This causes frustration, which Cheung sometimes sees expressed as shyness or aggressive behavior in children attending her school.

Jumbled Words

"It's normal for children to mix languages a little," says Schuett, "as they may not know the word they are looking for in a particular language." When this happens it's important not to get impatient, but to re-phrase in your own language what they said, continuing the conversation but showing them you have understood. For example, if your son says to you "look, balloon" in English, but you want him to speak to you in French, reply in French "yes, that is a beautiful balloon", so your son knows he has been understood, and can fill in any vocabulary gaps he may have.

Gaps in vocabulary can also be situational. For example, a child may only know how to talk about cars or fishing in Daddy's language (to stick with stereotypes), and cleaning or cooking in Chinese, because this

is what the child hears the *ayi* talking about most. "To fill these gaps, allow your child(ren) to express themselves in the language that comes naturally," advises Schuett, "but again, gently repeat what they said in your own language as part of your reply, so their vocabulary in all languages can expand and grow."

According to Sanderson, it is com-

mon to correct a child more or less depending on their age and mental capacity. "With a one-year-old communication is the goal," he explains, "so you would accept the use of one word instructions like 'more'. Once they are a bit older, however, you would expect to fine-tune their choice of words and grammar, the same way you would with a monolingual child."

Positive Affirmation

Feelings of isolation are more frequent in children who are a little bit older when they arrive in Shanghai. They can feel caught between two worlds, and embarrassed about not speaking a language as well as their peers. "Give them lots of encouragement and positive affirmations," advises Carrie Jones, Counselor Coordinator for the Community Center Shanghai, "and do not get too caught up on correcting grammar—communication and confidence are the goals, not perfection."

If you follow these simple rules, multilingualism is not a threat to linguistic development, even though it may cause some minor delays at first. The good news is that multilingualism, and exposure to different cultures, speeds up a child's development overall, leading to a greater flexibility of thought, a stronger degree of empathy and a broader understanding of concepts that transcend vocabulary. This makes temporary hiccups more than worthwhile. ●

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