



Apply Now

MumAbroad  
Life
HOME
COUNTRIES
IN THE NEWS
CONTRIBUTORS
MUMABROAD.COM



When we move abroad, our languages move with us. Madalena summarises some of the concerns that globe-trotting parents have expressed over the years, about our languages abroad.

## Our Languages Abroad

When we move abroad, our languages move with us. Many parents wonder about their children becoming multilingual, or engaging in new ways of being multilingual. I did, too. My experience of multilingualism is both academic, from extensive research and teaching, and personal, as a parent of three trilingual children in a mixed family who has lived in six different countries and two continents. The headings in this article summarise some of the concerns that fellow globe-trotting parents have expressed to me over the years, about our languages abroad.

### My children are too old to learn new languages

Parents may hesitate to accept a posting abroad on the grounds that their children have grown past the best before date, as it were, to learn languages. Despite widespread belief that age plays a decisive role in language learning ability, [there is no evidence](#) to support this claim. Our habits, linguistic ones included, may well be old, but our ability to break them is not, if we so wish. We can all find the motivation to learn whatever we need to learn in order to do, and enjoy, what matters to us.

One very appealing reason for children to wish to learn a new language is that their friends in a new country use it. Socialising with peers, wanting to understand them and to gain access to their circles is all the motivation that's needed. One added incentive is, of course, that the children will soon notice that they are outperforming their parents' proficiency in this new language, since mum and dad are less likely to become as immersed in undertakings mediated by local languages.

### My children are too young to learn new languages

In multilingual and monolingual families alike, parents wish to spare their little ones an additional language 'burden', as many express it. Parents raising children multilingually from birth may balk at the prospect of nurturing their toddlers in a country where none of the home languages are used. They report, for example, that the children's languages are already developing unevenly: words are late or missing altogether in one or more languages, or the children mix their languages,

all of which they take to be signs of linguistic confusion and/or delay. They worry that additional languages will only compound whatever damage might already be there.

The facts are first, that [multilingualism has no correlation whatsoever with language delay](#), which is a clinical condition affecting monolinguals and multilinguals alike. The languages of a multilingual develop differently because they are there to serve different purposes: one to talk to mum, say, another to dad, yet another to friends or to discuss outings, hobbies, homework. If multilinguals were able to use all of their languages in exactly the same way, they wouldn't need more than one language: they would be monolinguals instead. Depending on the children's use of their languages, and exposure to them, certain words will naturally appear sooner, or later, or not at all, in one language or another. And second, the facts are that language mixes are typical multilingual behaviour, not tokens of language confusion. A new language won't aggravate a 'problem', because there is no problem: multilingualism is not about what languages can do to people, it's about what people can do with their languages.

The new language will find its place alongside the ones that are already there, and will develop in the same multilingual way. Parents raising their children monolingually, in turn, wonder whether it is wise to expose children who haven't yet acquired any language to a different one. They would prefer to 'give' one language to the children first, or wait until that language is 'in place', as they put it, before introducing a new one. Questions such as these relate to the belief that without at least one 'good' language from the outset, the children's overall cognitive development may suffer. The answer is that languages don't need to be acquired one after the other: simultaneous multilinguals are evidence of that. The answer is also that all the languages of a multilingual are good languages, because cognitive, social and emotional development draws on the whole of our linguistic repertoire, whether monolingual or multilingual.

## My children will have to attend a local school, but they don't know the local language

Before the move, if time allows, tuition in the children's new language may be arranged in the home country. In the case of impending moves, contacting the new school beforehand for advice and/or language tuition upon arrival might be a good idea. Once in the new country, however, the issue of being taught in a language that one is learning at the same time soon vanishes. The children's new language will take off on its own, given their daily exposure to it, the new routines that involve it and, not least, the new friends that use it.

In the first few months, the children are likely to have trouble understanding what is going on in the classroom, at all times. But then again, who doesn't? We all remember this kind of trouble in school, and not necessarily because the school language was new to us. Schoolchildren, whether born in the country of schooling or newcomers to it, are learning to use a language in a new way, for school purposes. This means that they are also learning the language, by learning how to do new things through it.

Languages are tools, that we use to do other things with. We learn to use tools by using them, and the more we use them, the better we get at using them. The way to make a language ours is to use it, be it to attempt to express ourselves or to say that we can't do this yet, to share ignorance and knowledge through it, to be told off and praised in it, or to ask questions, and ask, and ask again, in it and about it. Which is, incidentally, exactly how babies learn their native language(s).

## My children are struggling with the school language, so we will have to start using it at home

Parents who consider making this decision themselves feel at least somewhat comfortable using the school language. This may not be true of parents who are urged, by their children's school and/or teacher, to switch to the school language at home. In the latter case, one might want to ask about which mechanisms the school and/or teacher have in place to teach that language to the parents, up to which standards, and within which urgent time frame. The first thing to bear in mind is that using a language in one setting does not promote its development in other settings. Switching to the school language at home won't solve school problems with that language. Home and school are distinct environments involving distinct uses of language, which do not transfer across each other. Switching to the school language may also defeat the parents' goal of raising their children multilingually, or bar the children's access to grandparents, little cousins, and other big and small relatives and friends back home.

Using the school language at home, however, is different from switching to it. Parents can implement linguistic division of labour in the home, using the school language to assist with homework, for example. Apportioning linguistic territory in this way is typical of multilingual families, and in fact no different from learning, as we grow up, that different uses of language associate with different purposes and with different people (school, home, peers, elders), whether we're monolingual or multilingual.

## My children have started mixing their languages

Mixed language, defined as the use of features attributed to one language (words, grammar, intonation) in another, is widely believed to be exclusive to multilinguals, although monolinguals use it, too. The difference is that monolingual mixes go by rather more benevolent labels like 'borrowings': words like bungalow, robot, typhoon, for example, or captain, mutton, prince, aren't indigenous to English but are nevertheless said to be English words. The observation that multilinguals mix their languages, often implying a deviation from some 'proper' linguistic expression, in fact describes typical multilingualism. Rather than evidence of deficient language command, language mixes provide evidence of proficient multilingualism.

Among very young multilinguals, reasons behind mixes are best sought in the children's motor immaturity. Beginner vocal tracts, or hands, need a long time and much hard work to acquire the sophisticated gymnastics required of fluent speech, or sign. When faced with, say, a difficult word in one language, young children naturally choose an alternative word that fulfils the same purpose but that they can manage more easily. So do all of us when learning a foreign language: children's first language(s) are as foreign to them. Very young children have no idea that they are learning what adults call 'languages', or 'different' languages – or that adults worry about such things. All they want is to get things done for them, and they do this their way.

Among older multilinguals, mixes relate to different languages having different personalities, just like people. Words or expressions in one language, rather than another, may strike us as more appropriate to what we want to say. One typical scenario is this: the children have just come home from school, and want to report their school day. The language of choice in which to do this is the school language, since the school day took place in it. The children are expected to use the home language instead but, to them, the home language lacks school-bound vocabulary and grammar. So one solution is to fill those gaps in the home language

with bits and pieces of the school language.

## My children refuse to use our home language(s)

One reason for this may be developmental. Very early in life, we gain awareness of ourselves as individuals, and of the world around us as independent from us. The overwhelming consequences of this realisation are perfectly expressed in the popular label 'The Terrible Threes'. From our parents' perspective, one of the terrible things that happens to us is our discovery that our peers are infinitely more fun to engage with than those oldies at home whom we'd so far regarded as the only available source of well-being. From around age 3, in other words, our children will do as we did before them, and start favouring peer company and adopting peer models. This naturally includes linguistic models, and this is why school languages are not only a powerful magnet, but a largely irresistible one.

Refusal to use the home language(s) may, alternatively, reflect the children's perception that those languages are there just to serve boring purposes like urging them to behave, wash their hands or go do their homework, or asking and answering perfunctory questions like "Can we eat now?" or "How was your day?" Choosing not to use a language may also be evidence of the Law of Least Effort, rather than a matter of refusal: if the children can get away with using a single language, because they know that their parents understand it and/or respond to them in it, why bother using several?

One way of retaining the appeal of home languages is to use them with our children in what engages them: films, music, theatre, games, books, outings. New treats experienced in the home languages may do the trick, or telling the children what our day was like, what they think of it and why, or that we'd love to cook together their favourite home recipe for dinner today.

Spoken and/or written interaction with relatives and friends back home may also help, including online, on email, on social networks. In short, anything that guides the children into (re)discovering a niche for their home languages, and that strengthens their perhaps dwindling command of them, is a good thing. Anything but language 'teaching': children learn best when they're not being taught, and the best language lessons don't target the languages themselves.

## My children use only the school language among themselves now

Peer appeal among siblings is the likely reason for this development. Parents may feel despondent that 'their' languages are losing ground to a new language at home, but multilingualism isn't a zero-sum game where a perceived gain somewhere must match some loss elsewhere.

Parents may well be the initiators of language policies at home, but our children's uses of the languages around them develop a life of their own that we can neither predict nor aspire to control. In addition, if we parents have our languages, why can't our children have theirs, too, since they go on using our languages with us? Sibling bonding, including linguistic bonding, is best managed by the children themselves. It's then up to us parents to choose to treat this new language as an intruder or a welcome guest to the family.

The children may revert to using their home language(s) among themselves, for similar reasons of peer appeal, once the family returns home and schooling resumes or starts in a home language. Or they may retain their new language as their common language – time will tell. Home language policies can't be set in stone, because language uses evolve with us and for us. This is true of families who stay in place, and all the more so of families on the move.

\*\*\*

## About the author



Madalena Cruz-Ferreira is a multilingual scholar, educator and parent. She is Portuguese, married to a Swede, and based in Singapore. Her book *Three is a Crowd?* reports the trilingual development of their three children. She holds a PhD in Linguistics from the University of Manchester, UK, and her blog *Being Multilingual* deals with child and adult multilingualism in the home, in school, and in clinic, which has been her research topic for the past 40 years. She is on Twitter @MadalenaCruFer.

## Comments

2 comments

  [Comment](#)

 **Kate Procter** · 168 followers  
Really interesting read, thanks Madalena. :)  
[Reply](#) · [Like](#) · May 20 at 4:35am

---

 **Madalena Cruz-Ferreira** · Singapore  
Thank you, Kate! Delighted that you enjoyed this article  
Madalena  
[Reply](#) · [Like](#) · May 20 at 10:45am

---

Facebook social plugin



Facebook Links:

[Spain](#) [Italy](#) [Germany](#) [France](#)

[MumAbroad Life Spain](#) [MumAbroad Life France](#) [MumAbroad Life Italy](#) [MumAbroad Life Germany](#)

The content of this website is the exclusive property of MumAbroad. It is published by us and may not be reproduced. All rights reserved. © MumAbroad, 2014