



## Playgroup parenting conflicts, Teaching a second language & Not speaking the community language

ANSWERED BY MADALENA CRUZ-FERREIRA

*Question: I am a native Spanish speaker, and we are raising our son bilingually in Spanish and English. When my son was 2 years old, I was delighted to find that there was a Spanish playgroup in our area and started attending with my son. Yet, after having attended the playgroup for a few months now, I find myself thinking about quitting. Even though my son really enjoys spending time at the playgroup each week, I simply do not get along with the other parents in the playgroup for a number of reasons. I have tried to work through my issues with the other parents but have not been successful. I worry that if we stop going my son will lose the opportunity to make friends with other Spanish-speaking children. I'm not sure what I should do. Do you have any advice?*

*Answer: You are right, it is not always the case that we parents enjoy the company of other parents, even from the same language and background. You also say, rightly, that your purpose is for your son to make friends, not you.*

I don't know how feasible this is in the community where you live, and how willingly other parents will take to it, but it might work to organize children-only play sessions at your home, for example. You could try inviting over a couple of friends your son gets along with best and have them play together for a while, or take them on some fun outings together. Depending on what the playgroup usually does each week, this may also help diversify the children's use of Spanish, which is a good reason for you to take this kind of initiative. Other parents may just follow suit.

*Question: I'm home schooling our two children 6 and 3. As a beginner myself in French, what is the best way to teach my 6 year old? I am self-learning, trying to find a tutor and I need a scope of sequence for concepts. She's reading English very well and is a visual learner. Any advice?*

*Answer: You mention in your question that your child reads English. I understood by this comment that you are interested in teaching her to read and write French, am I right? If so, you should make it clear to yourself and to your girl why this is useful. The same goes for teaching spoken French. I say this because children won't necessarily learn*

*what their parents think may be useful. Children must themselves see that things are useful in order to engage with their learning. Structured teaching/learning of languages is not the best way either to arouse a child's interest in using them.*

*If you are a beginner in French, and so is your child, the best way for her to learn is to find French-speaking children with whom she can play and have lots of fun with. She won't probably learn to read and write the language this way (that can come later), but she will feel at ease speaking the language with interesting peers and friends. This will give her reasons to go on learning more.*

**Question:**

*My wife and I are native Chinese speakers. We have been living in the United States for many years, and we now have a 3-year-old daughter. She speaks Chinese fluently, which we are delighted about, but she speaks very little English. Whenever we take her to children's social events, like birthday parties, where they have children's games, she tries to participate, but she is unable to answer in English. The other children sometimes end up ignoring her and the parents often tell us that we should be teaching her more English so that she won't be such an outcast. My wife and I are starting to feel a little worried, primarily about what it will be like for her when she starts school. We are concerned that she will be placed in a special class because of her limited English skills. Should we put her in an English preschool right away, so that she will have more English language exposure? Or should we not worry about it and just hope that it will all work out in the end?*

**Answer:**

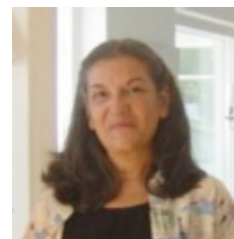
It may be that your girl just feels daunted by so many children around her at the same time. Perhaps she also feels that everyone else already has one or several favourite playmates in those groups, and she may not want to intrude. Small children are very aware of social networking!

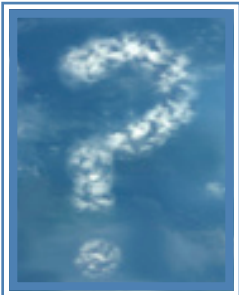
When we moved to an English-speaking country, and my children, one of them also aged 3, had to learn the language (we speak two other languages at home), I started by inviting home the children they described as their 'best friends' from the neighbourhood or from playschool, one at a time, so that both children could concentrate themselves on one another with no distractions, so to say. I first felt I had to help them organize their play, by suggesting games with lots of activity and not a lot of language: hide-and-seek, ball games, even watching an English-language TV programme or video worked fine. But they soon found their own ways of playing together and of using language with each other in ways that satisfied them. Sometimes it worked with the first 'best friend', sometimes with a 'better' best friend or an even better one; the children just kept on trying because they really wanted to be part of the fun, just like your girl.

I hope this will sound feasible to you. If it doesn't, please don't worry about her English when schooling starts for her in that language. What will probably happen then is that English will become her 'favourite' language -- from around age 3, peer models for language and for about everything else become much more interesting for children than parent models.



*Madalena Cruz-Ferreira is the author of *Three is a crowd? Acquiring Portuguese in a trilingual environment*, (2006) Clevedon, *Multilingual Matters* ([www.multilingualmatters.com](http://www.multilingualmatters.com)). She has received postgraduate degrees in linguistics from the University of Manchester, UK and is currently a Senior Lecturer at the National University of Singapore. Her main research interests are child multilingualism, multilingual phonology and intonation, and the language of science. She has lived in Singapore for over 10 years with her Swedish husband and their three trilingual children.*





## Reading in more than one language, Troubles with the letter “r” Keeping the language alive at home & immersion education recommendation

ANSWERED BY MADALENA CRUZ-FERREIRA

### Question:

*My daughter is 4 years old and she speaks English, Italian and Spanish. She is now learning to read in those 3 languages, and the same letter can sound very different making it hard to learn... how can I make it easier for her to read? Should I just teach her to read in one language first? If so, which one? (Right now she gets English at school, Italian & Spanish at home). Thank you!*  
-- Annie R.

### Answer:

I should start by asking you why do you want your girl to be able to read Italian and Spanish. I should in fact also ask the school authorities the same question about English. A four-year-old doesn't need to read anything, she needs to explore her surroundings at her own pace, play with sand and with clay, draw and paint, learn about plants and animals by watching and touching, or just daydream on her own. The experiences she gathers from this will help her develop the necessary cognitive skills to tackle reading later, much later -- when she needs it.

If your daughter is learning to read English in school, she will naturally become curious about reading in her other languages too. If she asks questions, say, about how the same letter sounds in different languages, or about how to spell words in her other languages, just answer her questions with a couple of examples. She will be curious about what she asked, not about structured learning of spelling conventions across languages, and simple answers to her questions will make these conventions clear to her: if she already knows that she must use different words in different languages, there is no reason why it should be hard for her to learn that different languages spell words differently.

### Question:

*My husband is anglo and I am a spanish speaker. We are raising our son targeting both languages cognitive, linguistic and culturally. My question is what can I do to improve his spanish speaking skills, mainly those letters that English doesnt have (RR sound)? That is the only thing our son is struggling with. I know he spends a lot of time with his dad compared to the time he spends with me, but he's still getting the spanish component. -- Alicia B.*

### Answer:

You don't say how old your child is, so I cannot tell whether he does need help with the Spanish 'r' sounds. All kinds of 'r' sounds are notoriously difficult for children, in any

language, so you can expect your son to simply drop 'r' from his speech or replace it with easier sounds for quite a while.

The best strategy is twofold. First, don't worry about his pronunciation. If your child realises your concern, say, because you keep correcting his 'r' sounds, it will rub off on him and make him self-conscious about his use of language. Second, go on as you are doing now, speaking to him, playing with him, doing all kinds of indoor and outdoor fun activities and listening to everything he wants to tell you, not to the way he tells you things. If, as you say, pronouncing 'r' is the only conspicuous feature of his Spanish, he'll grow out of it like all other children.

*Question:*

*My 6-year-old son was attending a great German immersion school, but we just moved to a new city with no such school. I hear there is a playgroup which I will attend. But I am looking for tips on how to keep his interest up in the language so we can work at home together on reading and writing. We speak the language (well, I do) at home. I'm afraid he will lose interest and refuse to work on skills in favor of more fun activities. Help! -- Mary W.*

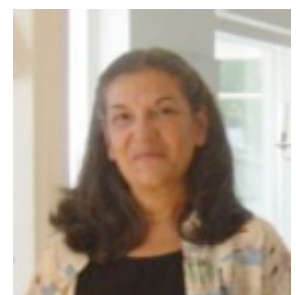
*Answer:*

The way for children to learn language skills is through fun activities. The same is true of adult language learning, by the way. There should really be no difference between the two, for effective learning: children learn new words through their own spontaneous word play, and practise sounds of their languages through sing-song and rhyming games of their own devising.

One way to develop and keep your son's interest in reading and writing is to provide him with reading materials appropriate to his cognitive development and to his interests. This will give him the self-confidence and the motivation, respectively, to want to read and write. If, for example, he likes fairy tales, ask him to choose his favourite one from among his books, and read it with him. You can take turns, one reader for each page or for each character, if he finds lengthy reading tiresome. Then ask him to retell the story in his own words. Then ask him to write down his version of the story, again taking turns if he so chooses, or helping him with more difficult words. Ask him to illustrate it with drawings too. You can of course also ask him to write down stories out of his own fantasy. And then read his own story back to him, as if it were a published masterpiece. You can discuss his feelings and any feedback he has on his own writing, and so make the whole activity a very engaging one for both of you. You may even come to experience what I experienced with one of my children after activities of this kind at around the same age: he put down his one-page story, with three lines of text and about a dozen colourful drawings, and sighed: "I'm an author!", using the new word he had just learned in school for 'story-writer'.



*Madalena Cruz-Ferreira, a native of Portugal, is the author of **Three is a crowd? Acquiring Portuguese in a trilingual environment, (2006)** Clevedon, Multilingual Matters ([www.multilingualmatters.com](http://www.multilingualmatters.com)). She has received postgraduate degrees in linguistics from the University of Manchester, UK and is currently a Senior Lecturer at the National University of Singapore. Her main research interests are child multilingualism, multilingual phonology and intonation, and the language of science. She has lived in Singapore for over 10 years with her Swedish husband and their three trilingual children.*

*Question:*

*In bilingual kindergarten/schools, with teachers of each language represented, how should the languages be divided -- one language in alternate weeks, or days? Should the OPOL method be implemented? -- Lara M.*

*Answer:*

In school, as at home, the best language policy is the one that comes naturally to all parties involved. This may mean that one set of people uses one single language to the children, or that everyone uses both languages depending on the weekday, or on whether the interaction takes place indoors or outdoors, for example. Children will adapt to any language policy and learn to respond to it. The one condition is that the policy is consistent, because children need to find out the rules that everyone around them follows, so that they can follow them too.

The answer to your question also depends on what the word 'bilingual' is meant to define. For example, a bilingual school may have monolingual or bilingual teachers. Do keep in mind that the OPOL method assumes that the 'P' (parent, person) speaks one single language only, and has therefore been discussed in the literature for monolingual adult speakers only. That is, it does not account for adults who are themselves bilingual and who may naturally choose to use a 'One Person, Several Languages' policy instead. This policy works fine too, not least because it gives the budding bilingual child perfect role models: adults who feel at home in two languages, which is precisely what the child is expected to do through bilingual home or school nurturing.