



Ask An Expert...

YOUR QUESTIONS ANSWERED BY MADALENA CRUZ-FERREIRA

Have a question for our experts?

Send it to: editor@multilingualliving.com.

Question:

I am hoping you can help me with this problem. My husband and I have a 9 month old baby girl. I was born in Poland and speak 5 languages: Polish, English, Hebrew, French and Russian. My husband was born in the USA and apart from English speaks some Hebrew. **We decided that he would speak English to our daughter and I would speak Hebrew to her. It's been working well so far.** However, now I think I would also like our daughter to pick up Polish from me. Is there a way that I can teach her two languages and if there is please tell me what's the most efficient way to do so. Another question is whether I can introduce our daughter to Spanish by getting her a Spanish speaking nanny. **Do you think four languages all at once would be too much?**

Please let me know. Thank you very much.

Marilyn

Answer:

Children will learn any and all languages that are used around them in natural ways. Children also learn very soon that a language is the way to communicate effectively with the people who matter to them, and if those people speak different languages, so will the children. **So your girl will have no problem learning four languages. This is the short answer to your question.**

The long answer is that, having said this, there is one important question that you may want to ask yourself. **Do you want to expose your girl to four languages because that would appeal to her or because that would appeal to you?** Learning languages for its own sake is great fun (I love it, for example), but children don't do it for fun, as said: they do it because it matters to them. If your nanny becomes part of the family in a way that Spanish also becomes part of it, no problem at all. But if you're considering a nanny just for the sake of one more language, then you may end up with an unhappy nanny and an unhappy child. It's the other way around: **it is the people who matter to children, the languages they speak are as irrelevant to them as the clothes they wear.** There's no great point either in wearing different clothes just for the sake of wearing them.

I see no problem with Polish, English and Hebrew. These are family languages, which Spanish clearly isn't. Your girl will learn Spanish very willingly if and when she finds a very interesting friend, her own age, who speaks it, for example. And you may come to find out very soon that children make their own decisions about which languages they want to speak, and which languages to speak to whom! I hope this helps!

Madalena

Question: I need some advice on language approaches with my son. **I am from India and so is my husband. I am bilingual (speak Bengali, Telugu, Hindi and English), but my husband can speak only Telugu, Hindi and English.** I want our son to learn both languages (Bengali and Telugu). We live in Memphis, Tennessee, USA. I read about the OPOL approach but I can't seem to stick to it. I seem to change languages from Bengali to Telugu, when I am around my in-laws. My husband, on the other hand, seems to speak in Telugu with him when he remembers to. **Also, when we are tired, we tend to speak in English with him. We speak in Hindi and Telugu with each other a lot. We don't speak to him in Hindi.**

Just a little background on my parents and in-laws: My in-laws can speak only in Telugu. My mom can speak Bengali, Telugu, Hindi and English. My Dad can understand Bengali, but cannot speak the language as fluently as us. He can speak Telugu, Hindi and English. My parents and in-laws live in India. **My husband prefers that my son learn Telugu because his mom can only understand that language and that my Mom is multilingual and it wouldn't be a problem for her to converse with our son in Telugu.** Though my mom can speak in Telugu, she prefers to speak in Bengali. I am torn between the two. **My fear is that if I switch from speaking in Bengali (which is not so often) to speaking in Telugu full-time with our son, he will never pick up Bengali.** I really want our son to be bilingual. Will this hamper his Bengali/Telugu learning ability? Which language will he eventually pick up? What should be our approach? Do we use Bengali/Telugu DVDs/Books/CDs? How do we stick to the approach? I am so confused. **I don't know which language to speak to him.** Sometimes, I wish I didn't know to speak Telugu. Please help.... Thanks, Meenakshi

Answer: Let me start by telling you that you are in very good company. I too had heard about the OPOL, thought that I had to stick to it and found myself unable to do so. Then I realised why: one person **one language**: 'one language' means monolingualism, right? **I am not monolingual and neither are you.** That was the problem: not with me, but with the OPOL itself, which is a policy devised by and for monolingual caregivers. It just cannot work for multilinguals, because, well, we're not monolinguals.

I just relaxed, from then on, and so did my husband. **We spoke to our children whatever language came naturally at any moment.** For example, we all used daddy's language to discuss celebrations related to his culture. Your children will also learn about different cultures associated with each language, right? Everything from how to use polite words to how to use appropriate body language. If you're teaching them cultures naturally, why not teach them languages as naturally? This realisation meant that we could enjoy being parents and stop worrying about being 'language teachers'. **Children don't need language lessons, they need love and care in whatever language.**

Your husband is absolutely right in wanting Telugu to be a family language, because grandparents are a crucial part of the family. Same thing for Bengali and any other language of relevance to your family. **So you don't need to worry about which language to choose, just use the one that is nearest to your heart at any time.** Your son will understand, follow your example, and he will become as multilingual as you. This was how you yourself became multilingual, wasn't it?

You may want to read what I said to Alice Lapuerta in an interview that is published in the March/April 2007 issue of Multilingual Living Magazine about my book, **Three is a Crowd? Acquiring Portuguese in a trilingual environment.** Speaking to children in more than one language doesn't 'crowd' the brain and cannot therefore "hamper" language learning. It's the opposite in fact, **multilingualism boosts your brain activity instead!** Come back if you're still wondering about anything.

Madalena

*Madalena Cruz-Ferreira is a multilingual parent, educator and linguist. She is Portuguese and she received postgraduate degrees in linguistics from the University of Manchester, UK. She is the author of **Three is a crowd? Acquiring Portuguese in a trilingual environment** (2006) Multilingual Matters. 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. Website: linguistlist.org/people/personal/index.html. Email: mcf636@hotmail.com*

