

ask an expert...

Language Support

I am Belgian, living in the UK and have a 15 month old son whom we are raising bilingually. I speak Dutch to him, my husband speaks English, and he attends an English nursery. All of our friends are English. My husband is extremely supportive and is even making the sincere effort to learn Dutch. We also make sure to visit my Dutch-speaking family on a regular basis. I have found a lot of local Spanish, German and French resources but not much in the way of local Dutch resources. I have also not found any other Dutch speakers in the neighbourhood. Without access to such resources, do you have any suggestions for (1) how I can provide additional Dutch exposure for my son and (2) how to receive the moral support I need to stay motivated?

Kat in the UK



Dear Kat,

First of all, let me congratulate you on your decision to raise your son bilingually, and also on your husband, for wanting to learn your language. That everyone in the household wants to understand what everyone else is saying is a very telling sign that everyone cares.

Second, I should tell you that I was exactly in the same situation as you when my first child was about the same age as your son. We lived in my husband's country, where my child had no access to my language except through me.

Now to your questions.

(1) How I can provide additional Dutch exposure for my son?

If you are a stay-at-home mum, you may not need additional resources. Your son will have enough daily contact with you for him to carve his own 'niche' for Dutch. This was the case for me, and what happened when my second child was born (also in my husband's country) was that the oldest one unquestioningly started using my language to the new baby. The reasoning seems to have been something like 'This is clearly the language that mums and babies should use among themselves.'

If you nevertheless feel that you want to broaden his exposure to Dutch in Britain, you can try books, audio and video in this language, that you can have sent to you from Belgium, or get yourself while there. Read to him, sing to him and together with him, teach him Dutch nursery rhymes and traditional stories, discuss these stories with him, plus exciting cartoon or other films (even dubbed in Dutch). The one risk I really sensed in being the exclusive user of my language to my children was that the children would eventually feel that my language was an 'adult' language and therefore of no interest to them. Making your son aware of the delights of 'child Dutch' will make him want to be able to enjoy such delights in this language.

(2) How to receive the moral support I need to stay motivated?

You say that you visit your Dutch-speaking family regularly. Watching your son communicate with them in Dutch must be an invaluable source of support, besides making you feel very proud of yourself -- and of him!

The nurture that he gets from your relatives in this language, which is surely different from the one you provide him with, is also an additional way of helping him stay motivated to use Dutch. Make sure to let your relatives be with him on their own (without you) as much as possible, so Dutch doesn't risk fossilising as "mummy's language". All-Dutch outings, sleepovers at your relatives', shows, or even playing games or watching TV quietly at home can do the trick. In short, make your son realise that Dutch is a very useful and fun language to have available, for many different purposes and for talking to many different people. Children are as practically-minded as we adults are, which means that they won't bother to learn anything, languages included, for which they see no use. And if your child is motivated in these ways to go on learning Dutch, then this will be your greatest motivation too.

I hope this helps!

Sincerely,
Madalena Cruz-Ferreira



Madalena Cruz-Ferreira is the author of *Three is a crowd? Acquiring Portuguese in a trilingual environment*, (2006) Clevedon, *Multilingual Matters* (www.multilingual-matters.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.

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ask an expert...

Too Many Languages?

My wife is French and I am Turkish, we live in Germany and speak German together. We will be moving to England soon for my job. Is it reasonable to try and speak all four languages with our baby?

Talking Funny?

When we get together for extended family gatherings, my sister's children who are 8 and 10 tease my preschoolers because they "talk funny." We speak Italian at home and my children go to an English speaking day care. This conflict with the cousins is causing tension with my sister and I. What is the most productive way to talk to her about this?



Answer to "Too Many Languages?"

Four languages is a lot to handle at one time. You have both practical issues to think about as well as those of the heart. There is no perfect answer. If you want to use the advice of linguistic experts like Fred Genesee (January 2007 Multilingual Living Magazine) and Grace Alverez (Multicultural Living 2006) you would talk to your baby in Turkish and your wife would talk to the baby in French. In the early years you could speak German at home as well. How strong you decide to use German as the family language will depend on whether you plan to be expatriates for a few years in England or immigrants. Eventually, if you stay in England, you and your wife will have to choose to communicate outside the house in English as will your child. From the psychological point of view, you have some tough decisions to make; what will be the dominant country culture for your family? As your child grows he will need cultural grounding as well as language grounding. Your family will be a blend of culture and language but which language and culture does your heart say should dominate? How often will your child see relatives from your homeland(s) Do your parents and your spouse's parent speak more than one language? Read the article on changing cultural identity in Multicultural Living February 2007. Remember there is no perfect way to do this and no good models either. Talk to other multicultural families for support. What you decide to do about the language(s) in the home is not as important as being consistent when you put a plan into place.

Answer to "Talking Funny?"

I don't know the whole story of your relationship with your sister but it is common for kids 8-10 to be intolerant of anything out of the mainstream. At that age "being like everyone else" is very important and children can be cruel. One possibility is to talk to your sister about giving her children some fun, positive experiences about Italian culture. It could take the form of books, movies for children (translated), comic books, food and cooking together, music for children, anything that would help these cousins feel included in the Italian culture. You might volunteer to come to their classroom with your children to bring food, songs, fashion, something upbeat and "cool". Ask your sister if she wants to participate in family "Italian night" with food, music and a few lessons for her kids to share with their friends. The important thing is to keep the conversation going on how you can connect the cousins in a positive way to your Italian culture and language.



Harriet Cannon, M.C. is a Licensed Marriage and Family Therapist and Consultant with over 20 years experience specializing in working with clients in life transitions; career, international relocation, bicultural and multicultural relationships and family issues. Ms Cannon has lived and worked in the United States and internationally for both the American Foreign Service and Puente Bretagna, a Chilean group of psychologists and Psychiatrists. Currently Harriet Cannon has her counseling and consulting office in Seattle, Washington. She consults throughout the Puget Sound to groups, international organizations and businesses. Most recently Ms Cannon was invited to present her research on the life stories of multicultural mothers and daughters at the International Family Therapy Conference in Washington DC in June 2005. For more information visit her web site at www.harrietcannon.com. If you have a question for Harriet, send it to her at: harriet@harrietcannon.com.

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