



## Ask An Expert...

**YOUR QUESTIONS ANSWERED BY MADALENA CRUZ-FE RREIRA**

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*Question: My husband and I are expecting our first child in February, and are planning on raising him/her as a bilingual/trilingual child. I am originally Canadian and speak English as my mother tongue. I grew up in Finland though and therefore speak Finnish perfectly also. I was basically raised bilingual because of my mother being Canadian and my step-father Finnish. My husband on the other hand is Finnish. To make things more complicated we live in Germany. We have decided on the one person-one language way, i.e. I will speak English and my husband Finnish. We think that the child will learn German later on pretty much "automatically" by playing with other children or attending kindergarten.*

*I've read a lot on bilingualism/multilingualism, but haven't come across my problem. In most cases the couple either speaks a third language to each other or live in a country where one of the languages they speak is spoken.*

*My question is how should my husband and I speak to each other? We usually speak a mixture of both Finnish and English, but I would say that more Finnish. I am afraid of us continuing this way as the only time the child will hear English then is when speaking to me. It is very important to us that the child learns both English and Finnish as otherwise communicating with our families would be very difficult. We are also planning on moving to Canada sometime in the future. We have thought of possibly speaking our own languages to each other, i.e. I speak English to my husband(his English is almost perfect and therefore would not be a problem for him) and he would speak Finnish to me. Does this sound like something that could work? In this case the child would always hear me speaking my language and my husband speaking his. Thank you in advance!*

*Answer: Same 'problem' here, Portuguese and Swedish parents living in English-speaking country, and same 'problem' in several other families. I'm not sure that speaking one language to someone and being spoken another works out all that well. I, for one, find it extremely off-putting. If nothing else, your child(ren) will have proof that people don't need to stick to one language, so why should they bother, say, speaking yours back to you? One strategy we followed in my family was for us parents to use my husband's language with one another when the children were around (he speaks my language too), because the children were more exposed to my language daily, for most of each day. This felt 'right' in some way, but again I'm not so sure that I should recommend it as some kind of 'fool-proof' practice. You and your husband can go on speaking both your languages between yourselves, children pay special attention to the language(s) directed to them anyway.*

*I wish you lots of trilingual fun!*

*Question: I have a question about One-Parent-One-Language families. Let's take a hypothetical child, Jamie, and her hypothetical parents. Mom and Jamie communicate to each other in French, and Dad and Jamie communicate to each other in Spanish. But what does Jamie do when she wants to address both parents simultaneously? When the family is sitting down at the table, eating dinner, does Jamie look at Mom and say "School was fun today" in French and then look at Dad and say "School was fun today" in Spanish? Wouldn't this get tedious? Wouldn't Jamie quickly tire of (sometimes) having to repeat herself in two languages?*

*Also, let's say that Jamie comes home from school one day with a bad report card. Mom and Dad call her into the family room and lecture her, in their respective languages. If they're both speaking at the same time (I've learned from experience that lecturing parents tend to do this), does Jamie have trouble comprehending both languages? Wouldn't the confusing languages, her parents' angry tones, and the subject (her bad grades) cause her to tune Mom and Dad out, something that hundreds of kids have done, even when being lectured in one language?*

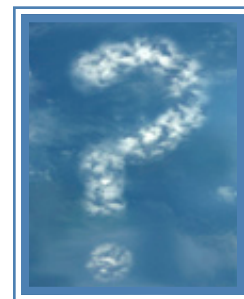
*Answer: Jamie wouldn't have to repeat herself if both parents understand both languages, and she knows that they do. She could use either, if she is addressing 'the family,' rather than one particular parent. She wouldn't need to interpret one language or the other for the benefit of the parents.*

*Children that are raised with two (or more) languages from birth are used to being talked to in two languages, and processing both, including simultaneously. That's part of being bilingual. Monolinguals do think that this state of affairs is confusing, as you say, bilinguals don't. And if she tunes out her parents in mid-lecture, she does it because hundreds of kids do it, as you also say, not because of the languages involved. Hope this helps.*

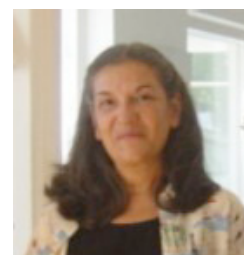
*Question: I have four-year-old identical twin boys (born Dec 2003) who were born in the UK and raised following the OPOL approach (father English, mother German). When they were 18 months, we moved to the Netherlands, where they attended a Dutch-speaking nursery for 2,5 days a week, while we continued with English and German at home. The boys began speaking Dutch at the nursery, even playing in Dutch at home sometimes or singing songs, i.e. clearly feeling at home in the Dutch language. In Dec 2007, we moved to Germany, where they now attend a Germany-speaking nursery, and their main language is German now. Dad continues to speak only English with them, but is mostly only home in the weekends. There has not been any exposure to Dutch since we moved here, apart from occasionally listening to Dutch children's cds in the car. Our question is now whether you could offer any advice on whether it would make sense to try and keep up their Dutch (maybe finding a Dutch playgroup, Dutch friends), even though we don't speak Dutch at home. Or whether it would make much more sense to try and support English more (which is quickly becoming their minority language through lack of exposure). Is there any point in trying to keep up a language with minimal (once a week) input? Thanks a lot for your help.*

*Answer: This really depends on your (the family's) plans. I had an almost exactly similar experience in my family, where the children were much more exposed to my language than dad's, all the while living in countries speaking a third language throughout the children's childhood. The children were exposed to a fourth language, German, when we lived in Austria for a period of time. Our decision was to stick to the parents' two languages at home, because we thought they would allow the children to develop their identification with relatives and friends back home -- or back 'homes', in our case... We never thought of keeping up German after we'd left Austria and there were no plans of returning to German-speaking countries. If the children should end up needing German again, we reasoned that they would (re)learn it there and then.*

*Children will learn any language and any number of languages, so long as they have it clear that the languages matter. Playing and having fun with Dutch-speaking friends can be one way of keeping that language relevant to them, but introducing or reinforcing a language just for the sake of the language itself or just because that language was once relevant may be problematic. I hope this helps!*



*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.*





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*Question: When one parent wants to teach two languages: Is it too ambitious for one parent to teach two languages to her baby simultaneously? The parent is fluent in both, but because her partner does not speak those languages she is basically on her own in raising her child in those languages. The father would be teaching the third. Is this going to confuse the child? Will the child be able to separate languages? Or is it better to stick to OPOL, only one language per parent?*

*Answer:* Hearing two (or more) languages from the same parent or other caregivers is a very common situation. Most people around the world are born into multilingual contexts, and so naturally use all their languages with their children.

There is no risk of language confusion. The only condition that children need to learn the languages around them is that adults use them naturally. There is no risk either of the child not learning the mother's languages: children will learn whatever languages are useful to them, and being able to talk to mummy is certainly useful – and fun. The number of people speaking to the child doesn't matter, what matters is the contents of the exchanges, which will motivate the child to want to learn the languages in which they take place. Finally, the OPOL is a policy that may work for monolingual parents. If one parent has more than one language, then using all of them is the natural policy. A bilingual parent will besides be the perfect model for a bilingual child.

*Question: What if the parents are monolinguals and want to help their adopted child maintain his/her heritage language, yet they do not speak that language? What advice can we give those parents?*

*Answer:* You say "maintain" the child's language, which I took to mean that the child already speaks it. If so, one way of keeping the language alive is to try to find other children of the same age who speak it too. Perhaps you could organise a playgroup for these children, which would also keep your child's heritage culture alive. Languages are not just languages, they are the prime vessels of different cultures. You don't say how old the child is, but adult-managed schooling or tuition won't work. Children do not need language lessons; they need to learn to socialise through language so that language makes sense to them, and they do this first with their caregivers, and then with their peers (from around age 3). If you cannot find a suitable playgroup, don't worry. You can always nurture the child's interest in the language and its culture by means of books, activities, stories, festivals, food, clothes, even described and enjoyed in another language. Children will re-learn any apparently 'forgotten' languages in no time, if they so wish when the opportunity to do so arises later in life.

*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) Clevedon, Multilingual Matters ([www.multilingualliving.com](http://www.multilingualliving.com)). 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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