

# Raising Multilingual Children

## Why the Fuss?

By Madalena Cruz-Ferreira

When is the last time you heard monolingual parents question whether or not they should speak their own languages with their children?

If most of the world speaks more than one language, what makes multilingual families question their choices?







PHOTO: © iStockphoto.com/abuu

Have you ever wondered why no monolingual family worries about the best way of raising their child monolingually? The issue doesn't arise in monolingual families because their use of language will, expectedly, be natural: the parents will speak to their child the (one) language that comes naturally to them, and the child will naturally learn it. In contrast, families which make a decision to raise their children multilingually, that is, in two or more languages, are bound to start at once seeking information and advice about what exactly should be done to achieve this purpose successfully. But have you also wondered why multilingual families should worry about this at all? In other words, what is it that makes multilingual families hesitate to resort to what must come naturally to them too, as far as uses of language are concerned?

The reason for this perceived lack of information about raising multilingual children is not that multilinguals are in the minority: they're not. Most people around the world are multilinguals. The reason is that most of what has been published and discussed about multilingualism comes from monolingual sources, which besides see no paradox in taking findings about monolingual children as the norm from which to seek insight into child multilingualism.

This article draws on my own experience as a researcher in (child) multilingualism and a parent of three children who are multilingual in Portuguese (my language), Swedish (my husband's language) and English (the children's school and peer language). Since parents usually express their concerns over their children's language use around a core of questions and worries, I chose to present the article in dialogue form, with a number of commonly raised issues as headings.

### What is multilingualism?

Questions about multilingualism start with its definition. There are virtually as many definitions of multilingualism as there are writers who deal with the matter, which means that no two people are actually talking about the same thing when they talk about 'multilingualism'. Here is one (I hope!) straightforward approach, to start us off: multilingualism involves the regular use of several languages. This applies to countries as well as individuals, the latter being our concern here. A multilingual is thus someone who needs and uses several languages in daily life. This in turn means that a multilingual is not the sum of several monolinguals: if you use several languages in exactly the same way, every day and for the same purposes, then you don't need several languages. One is enough. Typically, the different languages of a multilingual develop in different ways, precisely because they are needed for different communicative purposes.

### How can my child become multilingual?

People become multilingual in exactly the same way and for exactly the same reasons that people become monolingual: because they need several languages, or only one language, respectively, for their everyday communicative needs. In

other words, it is as natural to grow up multilingual as it is to grow up monolingual. Children learn the language(s) around them in the same way that they learn the social behaviours and cultural traditions to which they are exposed, through experiencing these in meaningful practice. Becoming multilingual is not a 'trick' that some 'clever' children are 'taught' in order to 'impress'. There's nothing impressive about being multilingual, because it is the natural consequence of multilingual needs. Its purpose is what explains the motivation to learn languages, and is in fact the reason why human beings learn to speak at all. Need, and the motivation that goes with it, together, are the driving force behind all human endeavour, and language is no exception.

### When should my child begin to learn a new language?

When the need to use that language arises. Some children learn several languages from day one, for example in mixed families where different languages are used simultaneously. For these children, all of their languages (or none of them) are 'new'. Their multilingualism shows that learning different languages does not necessarily mean learning them one after the other, and that there is therefore no need to wait until one language is in place, as some people would have it, to start introducing a new one -- the problem here is of course deciding when exactly is a language ever "in place", given that language learning is a lifelong process.

Other mixed families choose to start off with a single language, and introduce other languages successively later on. Yet other families find it best to switch language according to place or time, for example, one language at home, another outside, or one language on weekdays, another on weekends. Any of these strategies will work fine. The bottom line is that the children understand what's going on, as far as language uses in the family are concerned. There is no 'golden rule', no single 'foolproof' strategy to raise multilingual children successfully: the family decides what best suits their needs, because every family is unique and so is every child.

The child's age doesn't matter, by the way. What really matters is first, that the child feels the need to use different languages on an everyday basis and, second, that the child is consistently exposed to natural uses of language.

### I am multilingual myself, from birth. Should I choose only one language to speak to my child and, if so, which?

Whether you're monolingual or multilingual, matters of language policy are best decided by the family itself. Often, there is in fact no conscious 'decision' about language use, in that one language or another will spontaneously emerge as the right one, in actual practice.

This means that you don't need to force yourself to use one single language at all. Contrived uses of language have nothing to do with nurturing children. Perhaps you will dis-



cover that one of your languages sounds more appropriate to discuss, say, school matters, whereas a different language definitely matches a good romping before bedtime better? Or that the language that gushed out of you to react to your child's scraped knee and bloody nose at the playground is not the same that you find yourself using while giving instructions about tooth-brushing.

In short, don't become self-conscious about your uses of language. Children will attune themselves to whatever language uses they find around them, because they have no idea whether mums and dads 'should' speak one language each, or different languages, or more than one language, or both the same language, or which language goes with what. Whatever choice of language(s) comes naturally to you will come as naturally to your child. Just play it 'by heart'.

### **I became quite fluent in a second language, and I would like my children to learn it too. Can I use this language with them?**

Yes. There are reported cases of successful child multilingualism in families where parents chose to use a language which is not their first language. The only condition is that language which is directed to a child sound genuine. Language 'lessons' play no part in parenting.

Life with a child is all about being there for the child, and your language is an inherent part of this. Ask yourself, before you decide on a language policy for the home, which language do you feel comfortable using to play with your children, to comfort, cajole them and tell them off, to sing to them and recount fairy tales, and to discuss whatever will come to matter to them, or to you, as they grow up. Keep also in mind that a language is much more than itself: it mirrors a culture too, and a way of being in life.

### **Why should I raise my child multilingually? Isn't it true that language development in multilinguals is often delayed, or impaired?**

Many monolinguals have indeed persuaded themselves that multilingualism results in language delay or impairment, in the same way that they believe that their language is the only one worth learning at all, as a pre-emptive measure. I know of no multilinguals who agree.

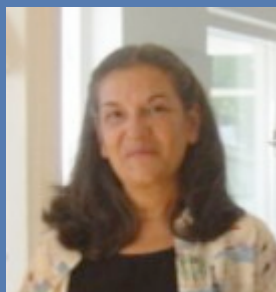
The myth that multilingualism is synonymous with linguistic impairment comes from early studies on multilingualism, where multilingual children were unfairly compared to monolingual children (or even monolingual adults). More recent findings, gleaned from properly controlled fair experiments, show that language abilities develop in the same way and at the same pace among monolinguals and multilinguals alike. The fact that multilinguals have several linguistic systems to deal with will neither delay nor speed up their language development. What we can sensibly say is that monolingual and multilingual children develop differently, which is as commonsensical as

saying that children with or without siblings develop differently. There's no more reason to take monolingual children as the norm for comparison with multilingual children than there is to take single children as the norm against which to assess siblings.

### **How many languages can our brain handle? Isn't it true that multilingualism impairs cognitive development?**

Our brain can handle as many languages as needed. Some people make do with one single language throughout their lives, other people do equally fine with three, four, or more languages every day. If multilingualism were a cause of impaired cognitive development, then the majority of humankind would suffer from some kind of cognitive deficiency. As far as we know, there are no more cognitively deficient individuals among multilinguals than among monolinguals. It is true that a lot of people (mostly monolinguals, yes) have speculated throughout the years about multilingualism being synonymous with reduced ability, in languages themselves or in other intellectual domains. As if increased linguistic space in the brain would automatically result in decreased brain roominess for other languages, with associated impairment in other mental activities. To me, this kind of reasoning makes as much sense as claiming that a pianist should refrain from learning to play the saxophone, or else risk losing the ability to play the piano, or to do math, or both. Fortunately, our brain capacity is much larger and much more flexible than popular views about it lead us to believe. We all know, for example, that some people reckon in their heads how much they are going to pay for the groceries heaped in their trolley before they reach the checkout counter, whereas other people need a pocket calculator to do their times tables. It is equally true that some people need different languages and calculators, whereas other people don't, or vice versa. Our brain does just fine, whatever we require of it. Increased mental activity, dedicated to languages or otherwise, has the same effect on the brain that a good workout has on the body: it invigorates.

(Parts of this article appeared in *Swea Singapore* (vol.1, pp.30-32, 2004), the magazine of the Swedish Women's Educational Association in Singapore.)



*Madalena Cruz-Ferreira hails from Portugal and has lived in Singapore for 12 years, with her Swedish husband and their three trilingual children. She has several publications on child multilingualism, including a book, *Three is a Crowd? (Multilingual Matters, 2006)*. Webpage: [profile.nus.edu.sg/fass/ellmcf/](http://profile.nus.edu.sg/fass/ellmcf/). Email: [ellmcf@nus.edu.sg](mailto:ellmcf@nus.edu.sg)*