



# Ask An Expert

Immigration woes, language barriers & non-native Spanish

**BY HARRIET CANNON & MADALENA CRUZ-FERREIRA**

*Question: I met Mario when I spent a year studying in Brazil. Shortly after I returned to the US he joined me and took his engineering masters degree at a university here. We married and returned to Brazil where we intended to settle, but in 2 years neither of us could get a decent job even with his family connections. We had a baby and returned to the US where we have been for a year. My in-laws just left after a month long visit. They are very angry that we are back in the US, nothing seems to console them and this is causing conflict between my husband and I. Any suggestions?*

Answer: The biggest reason people immigrate is for professional and economic opportunities and your experience seems to fall into that category. My guess is your husband's parents are very upset that the professional opportunities in the US have lured their son away from Brazil and they are blaming you. Your husband's part in the conflict may be he is also torn by his choice to stay in the US especially after spending time with his parents who are so unhappy. In his worst moments he may also blame you for introducing him to possibilities he had not considered before studying in the US. It would be helpful to talk to your husband about what he misses most about Brazil, what would make him feel better about his choices to stay in the US, how you two can bring more Brazil into your everyday lives. Making visiting Brazil a priority could also give the in-laws confidence you are not abandoning them or the language and culture. Sending DVDs of the baby to include them in his development and language skills will be a salve on their disappointment. Speaking Portuguese at home to ensure your child will be able to communicate with his Brazilian relatives will also help. Do try and stay out of any conversations with your in-laws where you are the one justifying why you live in the US. That is a job for your husband. They will become more accepting over time if he takes the lead in communicating your decision and rationale for living in the US.

*Question: I am Swedish and my husband is from Canada and we live in the US. We have an 18-month-old daughter and I am speaking to her exclusively in Swedish. My husband has two children 10 and 12 who live with his ex-wife in Vancouver, BC. My step children visit 3-4 times a year during school holidays and we have gotten along well until recently. As my daughter has several words now, babbles to us and my stepchildren in Swedish, my stepchildren are resentful she isn't speaking English. I think they feel left out because although my husband isn't fluent in Swedish, he does understand and speak somewhat. How can I ease this conflict?*

Answer: Blending families under any circumstances has many challenges and your situation with two languages where there used to be only one highlights the fact that you are a blended family. You have good intuition in coming to the conclusion your step children feel left out. There are a few things that might ease the conflict. The first strategy might be to increase the time your husband spends alone with his children when they visit. Time alone with the Dad who now has another family will let them know you are not threatened by his relationship with them and want them to have their special time together. Being gracious with your husband's time can lower their anxiety about you and the Swedish language and culture. The next strategy can be to get your stepchildren more involved in things Swedish by using their bond with their baby sister. Food, games, music, movies with subtitles, a trip to Sweden if you can afford it will help your stepchildren feel included and more confident to experiment with Swedish in a playful manner. You can have them read Swedish toddler books to the baby. The baby will not care about their accents and will enjoy it. This will help cement your stepchildren into a relationship with their sister while she is little. You can let them know she will have English at preschool/school and be better at English as she gets older. Have confidence and keep up the good language work!

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*Question: I'm a non-native Spanish speaker, and I'd like to start teaching it to my 9 month old daughter. I've read dozens of books and research articles on bilingualism, so I know it's rare for a non-native speaker of a language to teach it in the home. Some of what I've read is encouraging, and other stuff essentially says "Don't even try it, because if you're not perfect, it'll be a bad experience."*

*I'm holding back from trying because I don't know what expectations to set for myself, and her. I lived in Paraguay for two years, and have taken 18 Spanish credits when I was in college. So I speak "fluently," but obviously cannot converse about auto mechanics or engineering in Spanish. I'd like to give it a try, but I want to make sure it is positive, and not stressful. If there is any hope for it working, then I'd love to know!!*

*I would really appreciate any advice or suggestions you have for me. I'd like to know how I would work out practical details, such as, since all our friends speak English, would I speak in English to her in the company of others, and relatives?*

Answer: There are reports on successful using of non-native languages in the home, so if you decide to use Spanish to your girl, you're not alone and you can expect to raise a happily bilingual child. If anyone wants to criticise you about this choice using arguments like the one you mention, "you're not perfect", ask them to give you examples of 'perfect' language users or, even better, a definition of 'perfect' language use. I, for one, don't know what that might be.

Don't worry either about auto mechanics and engineering. If your girl grows to find these topics relevant, then you and her will also find ways to talk about them, in Spanish or in any other language. Being multilingual means using different languages for different purposes, so you (or her!) don't need to be able to talk about all topics in all languages. If you did, one single all-purpose language would be enough. My children (three of them, all trilingual), now in their late teens and early twenties, still prefer to use one particular language to talk about the topics that they first associated with that language.

Keep in mind one thing: your girl has no idea that you are using a 'non-native language', or even a particular 'language' with her. You're being her parent, which is what she needs from you. Language use in a family is not so much a matter of teaching as a matter of feeling, in the sense of 'what feels natural', so this is your expectation for both her and yourself. If you feel that you are going to have to force yourself to use Spanish, if you find that you are fussing about what language to use to your child, that your brain tells you to use one language whereas your heart tells you to use some other language, then follow your heart. Perhaps your heart will tell you to use one language for everything except for when your child rushes to you in the playground wailing about a bleeding nose? Or to rock her to sleep?

It's also fine to use different languages to your child in this way. You know best what comes naturally to you to nurture your child. The only condition is that you should stick to your choice of languages, once you've made that choice. In languages, as in everything else, children need to know what the rules are, so they can learn to follow them.

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