



Building your Child's Bilingual Skills



Parents look forward to sharing their love, values, culture and language with their young children. If a family uses two languages, they may hope their children will communicate comfortably in both languages. They might want their children to learn one language for school and another for home, or one language for the community and another for the family. There is much a parent can do to promote language learning within the child's environment.

Young children with hearing loss may have some challenges learning to listen and speak a first language. To develop spoken language skills and learn a second language, a child needs access to the sounds of speech through his hearing aids or cochlear implant. Talk to your child's audiologist so that you are aware of his listening skills and have realistic expectations. Also talk to your early intervention team so each professional understands your plan. The speech therapist might also want to document your child's progress in learning two languages.

Consider these guidelines to help your little one begin to speak more than one language:

Children learn spoken language by listening

Parents begin talking to their children at birth, and filling their days with language. Parents, family and friends talk and sing songs. When a child is diagnosed with a hearing loss, parents talk even more as they guide their little ones to learn the meaning of their words. This is equally important in using a second language. Consider when your child will use his second language and with whom. This might include conversing with grandmother, socializing outside of the home or communicating at school. Studies indicate children need to hear a second language several hours every day in order to become fluent. Family members will want to speak to the child in his second language every day for a significant amount of time. Perhaps the child will be reading books and singing songs with a favorite relative in that second language. Listening is the first phase of learning a language so your child needs to hear words, songs and conversations again and again in that second language that the family cherishes.

Children learn language through experience

Preschool children know the language of mealtime, dressing and play. When focusing on a second language, parents might decide when or where to use that language. You might decide to start with playtime as you talk about colors and shapes, read books and sing songs. Join your child in play (not a structured lesson) and begin to talk. While he is coloring, he will hear new words and associate them with the colors he is using. You don't need to explain that you are using a second language --- just do it. And talk, talk, talk. "You want the green crayon. What a pretty green picture! Let's look for things that are green." Provide your child with new and familiar language for everyday routines and new experiences.

If the family chose mealtime as the time to speak a second language, plan to converse together. Share what happened that day or chat about past and future

activities. “You helped get dinner ready tonight. Now it is time to put this in the oven to heat up. Later we will share it with Grandma. Maybe tomorrow she will teach us how to make her favorite recipe. What do you want to do with Grandma? Remember when we showed her the little dog who lives across the street?” Discuss actions, feelings and thoughts. Every day is language experience.

Children learn language through structure

If a family speaks one language at home and another in the community, it will be helpful to provide many opportunities to use the second language. The child might converse at the park, participate in play dates or communicate while shopping. Soon he will realize that different words are used when leaving the house. Will you use the second language when you converse with your child outside of your home or only when conversing with others? There is much to consider in different situations and each family will make the decisions that are right for them.

But remember that a strong language base must be created by:

- Structure, which means using the second language in the situation you have chosen.
- Consistency, which means using the second language in that environment and not just occasionally.
- Language-rich input which means frequent interactions with fluent communicators using diverse vocabulary.

Children learn language through meaning

We all learn when we are interested, connected and having fun. Think again about how children learn their primary language. Just asking your child to repeat a word does not mean he understands what you are saying. In fact, he will probably just be copying sounds. It takes a long time before a child with a hearing loss begins to understand, but suddenly one day he hears, “Go get your shoes” and he runs to get them. Your child will learn a second language in the same way. He must listen, recognize the new speech sounds he hears, and understand their meaning. This is called “receptive language” and you might want to keep a list of the words you know that your child understands. Then listen closely for him to say those words. At first he might just make babbling sounds that reflect the pitch and rhythm of the language. Then you will hear “word approximations.” You know that he is trying to

say the words but he is not using all the speech sounds. With practice as he talks to you, words become more understandable.

This is the time to remember an important principle in spoken language development: all children need a vocabulary of over 150 words before beginning to speak phrases or short sentences.

Children learn through success

All children love playing, and this presents an excellent opportunity to present new language. Think about your child’s favorite toys and the words you can use. Think about bedtime words as you put a doll to sleep, or clothing words as the doll is dressed. Encourage your child to participate in these little conversations so they are successful in communicating in small parts of these fun conversations.

Children are interested in what is said to them, but they have a lot to say, too. While learning a second language, a child will use words from his primary language if he does not know that word in his second language. You can help him complete a thought in one language by gently supplying the word he does not know. But sometimes it’s just best to let him talk as he shares his many thoughts.

Your child needs to learn a whole language, so it’s important that you do not mix languages in a sentence. For example, you would not want to say, “You have a pretty muñeca.” But you don’t want to frustrate your child, so if it is necessary, you might use the same word in both languages. Then you could say, “You have a pretty doll. Yes, that’s your muñeca, doll.”

When a child tells someone to do something and they do it, their words have power and he knows he has been understood. For example, your little one might say “ju” as he points to the refrigerator. When you provide juice and reinforce that word, he has expressed himself, been understood and caused something important to happen in his world. Success like this empowers your child to use those words more often.

It takes time and thought to develop specific strategies for a child to learn a second language. Each family is different and will approach language learning in their unique way. These suggestions can help you begin building a bilingual environment for your child.