

# The benefits of **MULTILINGUALISM** IN THE FAMILY



**ADVICE FOR  
PARENTS**

In the UK, schoolchildren have been found to speak more than 300 different languages. While learning English is important for multilingual children to integrate into the community, it is also crucial to understand that growing up with more than one language is a great asset for them.

Speaking two languages can help a child:

- Develop stronger social skills
- Be a better language learner
- Celebrate their cultural heritage
- Communicate with their extended family

## FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

### **Do children get confused when they hear two different languages spoken around them?**

Studies show that bilingual infants can tell the difference between two different languages on the basis of what they sound like. This is true when the languages are different (like English and Mandarin) and when they are very similar (like Spanish and Portuguese). Bilingual toddlers soon learn who speaks which language around them.

### **Do bilingual children confuse their languages?**

Children may switch back and forth from one language to another, but this doesn't mean they are confused about which language they are using. They may switch because a specific word is difficult to translate, but also because a concept or a joke may be better expressed in one of the two languages. It can also just be good fun to switch languages!

### **When and how should we start speaking both languages to our child?**

The best way to introduce your child to your home language is to speak it naturally and to start from birth. Children need to hear and use a language regularly in order to learn it. You, as their parent, are their best teacher for their home language.

### **Should I read to my child in English or in my home language?**

We know that reading to your child increases their vocabulary and this is true in English and in your home language. Reading in your home language will support their literacy skills as well as their home language development more generally. Also, knowing how to read in one language can help a child learn to read in a new language, so any reading in any language is beneficial.



**Should we switch to English when our child starts school?**

It's really beneficial to continue to use your home language, especially if your English is not fluent. Just keep talking and reading with your child in your home language and, if possible, interact with others who speak the same language. Your child will be hearing and using more than enough English at school.

**My child often refuses to answer me in our home language. Should I just give up?**

Don't give up! This is really common, and even if they are answering in English, they are still benefitting from hearing you speak their home language. It can be difficult but try to create situations where they are motivated to speak in your language, for example, spending time with friends who speak the same language or playing a board game printed in your language.

Maintaining the home language:  
**TIPS FROM PARENTS TO PARENTS**

- 1 Watch TV shows and films in your home language.
- 2 Find daily opportunities for using the home language, for example during a car journey or during a meal. Talk about things that really interest your child.
- 3 Explain to your child why you prefer talking in your home language and why it's helpful for them to know this language.
- 4 Think about going digital. For example, have all electronic devices set to your home language; or with older children, text and email only in your home language
- 5 Reading and singing. Reading and singing in your home language is a fun activity for younger children and rhymes make it easy to remember words. Older children can read independently in their home language which will help to build their vocabulary and grammar skills.
- 6 Be social! Find ways for your child to speak your home language with friends and family, for example attending a Saturday school or a playgroup, or video-calling family back home



## WANT TO KNOW MORE?

Browse our website for events, useful information and answers to the most common questions about bringing up bilingual children.

<https://research.reading.ac.uk/celm/who-we-work-with/parents>

Check out our YouTube channel  
[www.youtube.com/channel/UC8itPU0LuGJxktsIK-MoI\\_A](https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC8itPU0LuGJxktsIK-MoI_A)

## WHO ARE WE?

The Centre for Literacy and Multilingualism at the University of Reading brings together a multidisciplinary group of researchers broadly interested in language, literacy and multilingualism. Our members span multiple schools, departments and research centres across the University of Reading. We are focused on bridging the gap between academic research in these broad themes and ensuring practical impact with relevant stakeholders.

<https://research.reading.ac.uk/celm>

## MULTILINGUALISM IN THE FAMILY

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[www.reading.ac.uk/celm](http://www.reading.ac.uk/celm)