

Growing Our Children's Brains: Encouraging Home and Social Languages

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Dr Effrosyni (Froso) Argyri's research work at the University College London's (UCL) Institute of Education focuses on the language development of children exposed to more than one language; biliteracy, or the development of reading and writing skills in two languages; and the effects of childhood bilingualism on cognition and the brain. She is co-founder of UCL Bilingo, a UCL-based bilingualism/multilingualism education and information service and a mother of two multilingual children exposed to Greek, Icelandic, and English at home.

HOW CAN PARENTS SUPPORT CHILDREN'S BILINGUAL/MULTILINGUAL UPBRINGING?

Globally, an increasing number of children are exposed from a young age to more than one language. Families may move to different countries for various reasons. It is therefore important for the well-being of these bilingual/multilingual children that, from a young age, they develop language skills in both the non-societal and the societal/majority language(s). Children will consequently be able to communicate effectively with individuals within and outside the family contexts.

Bilingual/multilingual children who can use the non-societal language(s) will develop an enhanced understanding of their roots and support their relationships with relatives and grandparents. Studies show that all children eventually learn the societal language, although the use of the family language(s) is not guaranteed (De Houwer, 2020). Therefore, parents should use different strategies to increase the child's language exposure to the family/non-societal language at home and in other settings such as through playgroups and community language schools.

Research studies show that children's frequent and systematic exposure to the non-societal language(s) is important for developing good language skills. Studies also show that diversified language input used in various contexts and the child's opportunities to interact with different speakers are important factors for non-societal language development. Parents should thus create interesting opportunities where their children can frequently use the non-societal language through high-quality exposure.

WHAT STRATEGIES CAN PARENTS USE TO SUPPORT THEIR CHILDREN'S BILINGUAL/MULTILINGUAL UPBRINGING?

There are different strategies families can adopt to support their children's bilingual/multilingual upbringing. Examples include:

- joint parent-child book reading;
- audiobooks;
- picture books or story books;
- songs or rhymes;
- educational computer games (for literacy, grammar, and vocabulary);
- non-societal language-speaking childminders.

Empirical studies show that the acquisition of reading and writing skills in the non-societal language is an important factor. Suggestions for specifically encouraging use of the non-societal language include:

- choosing from relevant TV and educational programmes;
- visits to the family's home country;
- family visits from the home country;
- spending time with grandparents or other family members who don't speak the dominant language well;
- children attending classes in community language schools or online educational programmes focusing on the teaching of the non-societal language.

WHAT FACTORS MAY AFFECT BILINGUAL CHILDREN'S LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT DURING SCHOOL YEARS?

Overall, length of exposure to each language seems to affect the bilingual children's language development and skills. Specifically, research studies show that children exposed to two languages systematically from a young age usually perform better than children exposed to one of their languages after three or four years of age. Bilingual/multilingual children's language choice patterns may also change when they start attending school where they receive systematic, frequent, and diversified input in the societal language.

Research evidence suggests that the bilingual children's societal language proficiency increases during the school years, whereas children may tend to use the non-societal language less frequently. As a result, lesser use of the non-societal language may affect non-societal language skills even in children who were exposed to the societal language at a later stage. In addition, many bilingual children may have more positive attitudes toward the societal language than the non-societal language, and this factor may also affect the use of the non-societal language.

Frequent and systematic exposure to the non-societal language, however, combined with the child's communicative need to use the non-societal language may offset the powerful influence of the school language. In this way, children who are exposed to more than one language may grow up speaking both the non-societal and societal languages.

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