
Title	Help your child learn a second language
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HELP YOUR CHILD LEARN A SECOND LANGUAGE

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GOOD PARENTING SEMINAR

HELP YOUR CHILD LEARN A SECOND LANGUAGE

TALK OUTLINE

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ONE-HAND RULE
 - a) Be positive to second language yourself
 - * Learn or re-learn the language
 - * Be seen using the language
 - b) Encourage your child to use the language
 - * With parents, grandparents, friends
 - * In different places
 - * During play and daily routine
 - c) Expose him to good language models
 - * Adults and children
 - * TV, Radio
 - * Songs, Rhymes, Stories (cassettes tapes & books)
 - d) Make learning fun and meaningful
 - * Follow your child's interests
 - * Then incorporate some language learning involving listening, speaking, reading or writing
 - e) Persevere when the going gets tough
 - * Know when to take a break
 - * Don't quit: When the goings get tough, the tough gets going

- 4 Conclusions
 - a) Research has shown that parents who are supportive of bilingualism produces bilingual children
 - b) Motivation is important in learning. "An ounce of motivation is worth a pound of skills anytime", David Elkind 1987

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12 Oct 91

GOOD PARENTING SEMINAR, 12 OCT 91
HELP YOUR CHILD LEARN A SECOND LANGUAGE

INTRODUCTION

1 LANGUAGE LEARNING IN S'PORE CONTEXT

a) Exposure to 4 official languages

In S'pore, we have 4 official languages i.e English, Mandarin, Malay and Tamil. We use them in many ways e.g in conversations, on TV and Radio, newspapers, books and so on. When babies are born, they are talked to but sometimes not in one of the 4 official languages. Perhaps in a Chinese dialect, Hindi or something else. However, more often than not, parents and children use one of the official languages. When our children go to kindergartens at 3 or 4, they are taught a second language. In spite of such exposure to languages, we are still worried about the learning of a second language.

b) Second language issue

Our second language issue is quite unique. Usually, a second language is a foreign language and the first language is a mother tongue. In S'pore, it is just the opposite; our first language is English and our second language is our mother tongue. It is strange to think that learning our mother tongue is a problem. But the fact is, it is.

c) Popularity of English language

My own personal view is that one of the main problems is that English is such a popular language in S'pore. You can survive quite happily with using English alone. It is the language of administration, law, commerce, science and technology. Politically, it is a socially binding language in that it is a neutral language with no identity with a racial group. In that way, it doesn't put one racial group at advantage over others. The wide-spread use of English creates problems for learning other languages e.g people don't see a need to learn other languages, in other words, there is little motivation here. Why do some people learn the second language then?

d) Reasons for learning the second language: pragmatic & cultural

People learn it for two main reasons: Pragmatic - we learn it to pass exams, we need a pass in it to get into a local university. The second reason is cultural. Our mother tongue is our cultural heritage; being Asians we should know our Asian identity otherwise the ethnic Chinese would become 'bananas' (yellow on the outside and white on the inside). For many people, these are not good enough reasons for learning the second language and therefore learning becomes an uphill task.

e) Fostering bilinguality/bilingualism

In S'pore, it is very obvious that the government is promoting bilingualism within the society and in individuals. Individual bilingualism is more appropriately called individual bilinguality. Let me say a little about each - In 1989, two researchers distinguished bilinguality and bilingualism. Bilinguality refers to the psychological state of a bilingual individual (who has access to more than one linguistic code as a means of social communication). Bilingualism, on the other hand, includes bilinguality as well as the state of a bilingual community. So when we talk about fostering the learning of two languages in our children, the term 'bilinguality' is more exact.

In S'pore, we have sleepless nights about how to foster children's bilinguality. When to teach what, and how to teach? Research in bilinguality is also not conclusive. It cannot answer questions like: i) What is the best strategy? ii) When is the prime time to learn? or one which attracts a lot of attention iii) Are bilingual children more intelligent? Sorry, no clear-cut answers.

2 SOME THOUGHTS ON CHILDHOOD BILINGUALITY

a) Simultaneous

From birth or anytime before 3 year old, children are spoken to in two languages. For example, mother speaks Mandarin to the child and father speaks English or a more common one, Mandarin and English are spoken to the child by the same parent. The child is exposed to 2 languages at the same time or simultaneously.

b) Sequential/Consecutive

From about 3 years or even later, a child is introduced to the second language. In S'pore, it would be the nursery school. It is called sequential or consecutive because it comes after one language system is fairly well established.

c) Pros and Cons

Simultaneous: Pros - Child are exposed to 2 languages right from the beginning (probably from infancy) and therefore the child would have no motivation problems to learn the 2 languages.

Cons - Generally, the child learns to speak later. Why? Some people speculated that the child is confused by 2 language systems as each language has its own phonemes, syntax and so on. Learning one language is difficult enough, not to talk about learning two. Also, there tends to be a mixing of two languages. But this will sort itself out eventually.

The other problem associated with simultaneous bilingualism is that you have the mother speaking in a second language and father speaking in English, but what do they speak to each other. From observation, the child would know that after all mother also speaks English. The child would know which is a more useful and prestigious language.

Sequential: Pros - Total immersion in one language and therefore less likely to be confused. Also, child speaks earlier and therefore can express his needs when he is about one year plus.

Cons - Child may not be motivated to learn the second language in the beginning because he can express his needs and desires so effectively in the first language. Secondly, he may have problem tuning in to the new language because of differences in the two language. But these initial problems can be overcome.

You may be asking 'Which is better?' Research findings on these strategies are not conclusive. Both produced competent bilinguals. Sometimes, you don't have a choice that is you may be proficient only in one language. In that case, you use the sequential approach.

d) Language Strategies in S'pore Homes: Recent Findings
(see attached)

3 HOW TO HELP YOUR CHILD LEARN A SECOND LANGUAGE? One-Hand Rule

a) Be positive to second language yourself

First ask yourself if you have any hang-ups and prejudices because unconsciously you may influence your child. For example, you may think learning L2 is a waste of time then you would encourage your child to learn other subjects and leave L2 to the last. Or you may have prejudice about people who speak L2 most of the time e.g that they are less intelligent, not refined. Or the L2 TV programmes are inferior to English/American productions. Ask yourself honestly if it is mere prejudice or facts; is it a matter of personal opinion or well-founded facts.

* Make some effort to learn or re-learn L2. I suspect in most cases it would be re-learning rather than learning from scratch. Even our PM is re-learning his L2. Using karaoke has proved useful and fun for some people. Personally, I think it is good because you have the lyrics, music and professional singer to sing along with. Watching L2 movies with English subtitles and singing along with your children (sometimes with lyrics) are also good ideas. Nowadays, there are bilingual story books for children, these are good starters.

* Be seen using the language: No testimony is more powerful than your child seeing you use the language even if it is substandard. He sees you use the language for communication and he wants to be like you. He would not think that L2 is for children only and for schools only. My children see me use Mandarin with my relatives and neighbours. In the market, hawker centres and HDB shops, I use Mandarin and Hokkien. I think you get a better bargain.

b) Encourage your child to use the language.

*The people he sees you speaking other languages to would also be the people he speaks the other language with. If you can't speak the language, encourage others to speak to him in L2. Popular 'targets' are grandparents and some friends.

*Use L2 in different places. Not only in the example I've given about market and hawker centres but in other places like zoo, parks, swimming pools etc. Different places give you a chance to introduce new words and expressions. Learning becomes very natural, meaningful and fun.

*During play and routine. Play is very young children's main business. Again in play like playing with dough, toys, tricycles, and balls and in routines like meals, bath, brushing teeth and sleeping, opportunities for using L2 are created. These are real situations for learning.

c) Expose him to good language models.

*If you are not good with the language yet, don't despair. Use other adult or children who are good with the language to play with him.

*Use TV and Radio programmes to come to your aid. Together with Karaoke, they provide some help.

*Nowadays, children's cassette tapes have songs and stories. Those are also sources of language models. Sing along with your child, let your hair down.

d) Make learning fun and meaningful.

I think you remember what you learn better when you enjoy the learning experience and you find them meaningful. It is the same with children. When children are motivated, they pick up so much on their own.

*Follow your child's interests. Nowadays, children like dinosaurs. Business people are smart, you find all sorts of materials on dinosaurs e.g stickers, toys, books, cups and plates etc. I know that some children have far more knowledge of dinosaurs than I, they can name you different types of dinosaurs. When they are interested, their skills and knowledge can easily put ours to shame.

*Talk to him about his latest pet topic. Introduce words spoken or written to him. Maybe you may need a good dictionary to help you with new words.

e) Persevere when the going gets tough.

I always maintain that good things in life don't fall from the sky. You've got to work for it. You need perservance. However, if you are tired or not in the mood, give yourself a break (Take a break, take a kit-kat). Don't feel guilty. On the whole, we are very conscientous people, don't be too hard on yourself. Believe me, I know how difficult it is to be a mother as well as a career woman. So, know when to take a break.

*Don't quit: When the goings get tough, the tough gets going. A time will come when using the second language is as natural as breathing. Then it will no longer be a conscious effort.

CONCLUSION

We just want to leave you with 2 important thoughts:

* Researach has shown that parents who are supportive of bilingualism produces bilingual children.

* Motivation is important in learning. David Elkind said "An ounce of motivation is worth a pound of skills anytime". In S'pore, we have gone metric so "A gram of motivation is worth a kilogram of skills anytime". Because when you are motivated, you will just go on and pick up whatever skills you need.

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