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Developmental Psychology

# Tips for parents – from research to everyday life

#4: Bilingualism in early childhood



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Our globalised world offers an extraordinary variety of different cultures and languages. In Austria alone, around 250 different languages are spoken. As a result, bilingualism is coming more and more into focus and many parents wonder how they can best support their children in growing up bilingually. We have compiled a list of useful, evidence-based tips to help parents support their children's language development in the best possible way.

## Starting early is half the battle

The widespread misconception that learning two (or more) languages at an early age can confuse a child deters many parents from raising their children bilingually. It is true that, especially in the beginning, so-called "language mixing" can occur, but this is not a bad thing<sup>1</sup>. Children just need time to distinguish between the two languages that they are learning.

Bilingualism has many advantages<sup>2</sup> and the earlier parents start teaching their child a second language the better. This way, speaking a minority language (i. e. the language spoken alongside the majority language in a particular country) is more likely to become a habit which is not only of great importance to the parents, but also to the children. In addition, this will also increase the likelihood that your child will become fluent in the language.

## Stay consistent and provide clear structures

Children whose parents are consistent in their language use are more likely to be able to actively use both languages spoken in the family<sup>1</sup>. In general, it is very important to stick to the chosen strategy. This way, children learn to associate different languages with different contexts or persons, which will eventually help to prevent unnecessary confusion. As parents, being able to speak and understand both languages is an advantage as no parent will feel excluded when a particular language is used.

In general, there are two strategies. **One Person – One Language** approach: One parent speaks one particular language (usually their first language) with the child<sup>3</sup>. **Minority Language at Home** approach: The minority language is used at home while the majority language is used outside. It is

important that both parents have a good command of the majority language to make sure that the child learns the correct use of the language.

## Get support!

Life in a bilingual family can be challenging for both the parents and the children. Supporting the language development of children is especially hard work for the parent who speaks the minority language. Handling this can be very stressful. Therefore, it is a good idea to network and to try to find possibilities of using the minority language also in contexts outside the family environment. This does not only convey the image of a living language to your child but also enables diversity in language use through the exchange with different people<sup>4</sup>. This plays a key role in understanding a language.

Parents can, for example, actively search for other bilingual families online. And even without networking, there are other possibilities to support your child. For example, various countries have institutes all over the world that promote the respective language and provide offers to support children in learning two languages. When it comes to language and bilingualism, working together is the key to success. So do not hesitate to look for people in the same situation as you.

Find out more at:

[www.kinderstudien.at/en](http://www.kinderstudien.at/en)

- <sup>1</sup> Asbrock, D. (2006). Frühkindliche Zweisprachigkeit. Bielefelder Institut für frühkindliche Entwicklung Diagnostik und Interventionen e. V. [bielefelder-institut.de/fruehkindliche-zweisprachigkeit.html](http://bielefelder-institut.de/fruehkindliche-zweisprachigkeit.html)
- <sup>2</sup> Antoniou, M. (2019). The advantages of bilingualism debate. Annual Review of Linguistics, 5, 395–415. doi.org/10.1146/annurev-linguistics-011718-011820
- <sup>3</sup> Barron-Hauwaert, S. (2004). Language Strategies for Bilingual Families. Multilingual Matters. doi.org/10.21832/9781853597169
- <sup>4</sup> Unsworth, S. (2016). Quantity and quality of language input in bilingual language development. In E. Nicoladis & S. Montanari (Eds.), Language and the human lifespan series. Bilingualism across the lifespan: Factors moderating language proficiency (p. 103–121). American Psychological Association. doi.org/10.1037/14939-007

