

# LESSONS IN LANGUAGE

Children in South Africa often grow up hearing two, or more, languages at home. In fact, bilingualism is the norm worldwide and has many benefits for your baby. By Beth Cooper Howell.

Parents often ask me whether children should be exposed equally to multiple languages from birth, or if they should only speak to their young children in one language while they are developing speech,” says speech therapist and audiologist Ashira Segal of Manor Medical Centre in Johannesburg.

“If you speak two or more languages, then you are in the mainstream globally. Bilingual and multilingual development is actually normal – it’s not confusing or inhibiting and does not slow development at all. With 11 official languages, it isn’t surprising that some children speak up to three or more languages competently,” she explains.

Ashira uses the example that many children speak one language at home, such as isiZulu, and then Granny speaks Sotho to them and they attend an English school.

Other children speak Afrikaans exclusively at home, but attend an English school. ➔

**TRY THIS!**  
Try singing nursery rhymes in the various languages your child will be learning while she is still in-utero.



## A bouquet of benefits

"Being able to converse in more than one language impacts positively in all areas of development," says Ashira. These include:

- Strengthening of cognitive skills, even if only one language is used regularly at home and the other socially.
- Increased overall memory.
- A tendency to be better and faster at completing puzzles and, in later years, solving maths problems.
- Better at multitasking and switching between activities.
- More flexibility and ability to adjust to changes in environment and circumstances.
- An increased ability to truly engage with people of other cultures, or when visiting foreign countries.



- According to recent research, bilingual and multilingual children have denser grey matter, helping them to effectively process language, store memory and increase attention span.
- Bilingualism even impacts the elderly, who show less cognitive decline and a slower onset of age-common conditions, such as Alzheimer's, when they speak more than one language.

## Speech development and school

"Speaking multiple languages increases a child's cognitive, social and experiential skills," says Ashira, "and there is no evidence to suggest any developmental delays as a result of regular exposure to more than one language."

If a child is having a speech or language delay, or difficulty in the classroom because the medium of instruction is English and not the home language, Ashira advises promoting English in an academic manner.

"For example, read books and give instructions in English, in order to promote the language development." However, she is clear that this does not mean you should stop speaking to your child in her home language. "We live in a culturally oriented country, so you should offer them every opportunity to learn. When they are newborn, it feels like a running monologue, but your child is benefitting from hearing multiple languages."

Speech therapy can be very useful here, as even preschoolers can present with speech or language delays, for a variety of reasons, she says. This can be resolved with therapy and homework.

## Mother tongue first?

Parents often wonder whether they should weigh speech in favour of a chosen language – usually the mother tongue. Ashira highlights the fact that bilingual and multilingual children have increased cognitive and social advantages and advises treating languages equally.

"If you are fluent in more than one language, promote them and expose your child to them, as you are giving them the ability to learn them all. Culture and language go hand-in-hand, so you are also giving your child the opportunity to truly gain a cultural experience through language," says Ashira.

## Back to basics

The best way to promote bilingualism from birth to age five starts with speaking both languages to your child in the womb and continuously thereafter, says Ashira. "Parents who have read a particular story or sung a song consistently to a child in-utero have commented on how their child knows that song or story best. The same rules as those for healthy speech development apply, she says.

- Respond to cooing and babbling in separate languages, so the brain stores them differently. When your baby is older, she will be able to differentiate between the two.
- Play simple games, such as peek-a-boo and patty-cake.
- Listen to your baby or young child – look at her when she talks to you and give her time to process and respond to what you say.
- Use a running monologue to foster multiple-language development. Discuss what you are doing, step by step. Today, for example, you might speak Afrikaans when showing her how to bake cupcakes; tomorrow, chat in English about getting into the car to go to the shops.
- Encourage storytelling and sharing of information.
- Show your child picture books and when she's older, read to her as often as possible.
- Remember that receptive language develops before expressive language, so she is learning and understanding even before she can speak.
- Music and singing are excellent tools for multiple language development. Repeating songs in different languages is a fun way to entrench vocabulary, understand sentence structure and encourage conversational language skills. The benefits of music include memory skills, listening skills and expression of ideas with words.



## On the daily

"Expand on what your child says, for example, 'book', by asking: 'Do you want the cat book or the dog book?'" Repeating actions such as these in different languages will result in them being stored for later use, and she'll soon be equally proficient answering your questions in both English and isiXhosa, for example, or in Afrikaans, English and isiZulu. "I also encourage parents to answer their children every time that they speak – even if they are unsure of what their little ones are saying. Encourage them to communicate by asking lots of questions," says Ashira. A common pitfall in parenting is directly correcting speech and grammar mistakes – this can result in lack of confidence among fledgling multilinguists. Rather repeat what the child says, but using the correct word. For example, if your little one says 'kitty dat' instead of 'kitty cat', you can say: "Oh yes! She's a lovely kitty cat", rather than pointing out her mistake.

Lastly, one of the best ways to encourage a casual, relaxed bilingual environment is for your child to play with children whose home language is different from theirs. Learning through play is the ultimate teaching tool. Most importantly, says Ashira, don't force your child to speak too soon, or to speak a particular language. "If you want her to speak the home language, you may create a negative association with it if you force the issue." **I&I**



*What moms say*  
 "Our home language is Afrikaans. I decided when my daughter was born that I wanted her to be fluent in Sesotho as we live in the Free State. From birth, the lady helping me raise my daughter only spoke Sesotho to her and she also has a Sotho name – Lebohlang (it's a tradition as I also grew up with one). She is now four years old and understands, speaks and even sings in Sesotho. Because of this, I am also learning.

– Sara-Lea van Eeden

"We're using five languages, including sign language. When saying the name of something, we repeat it in all languages. Now, at 19 months, my children can understand all five languages. We speak to them in English and Afrikaans, and are teaching them words in Portuguese and sign language for now. They'll also hear short sentences in isiZulu."

– Annelize Moodley

"My mom currently speaks Sesotho to my daughter. My niece and nephew speak Afrikaans to her, and my brother converses with her in isiXhosa. I speak English, so we're basically teaching her four languages."

– Sonia Nuna Ntowane

"I speak Afrikaans to my daughter and my husband speaks English to her."

– Lézanne Longbottom

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