

Frequently Asked Questions: Bilingual Family

My child doesn't speak as much as he used to since he/she started going to school.

Most new learners of English will go through a "silent period", where they are unwilling or unable to communicate orally, even though they understand much of what is going on around them. They are not comfortable speaking in the new language because it is difficult for them to express their thoughts orally. They need time to listen to others talk, digest what they hear, and observe their fellow classmates' interactions with each other. Because they are silent, it doesn't mean they are not learning the language.

Will my child learn a new language/more vocabulary by watching TV shows such as Sesame Street and Dora the Explorer?

No amount of screen time can take the place of face-to-face conversation with another person, where children learn not only vocabulary but also the communication skills of taking turns, response wait time, and other language conventions. By watching TV, children might learn heaps of words but no real context.



What can I do if I talk to my child in my native language but he/she only responds in English?

- Praise the child when they use the heritage language.
- Use the language yourself, consistently.
- Avoid force or punishment and above all, don't give up. Have patience.
- Make learning and practicing the home language effortless and fun.
- Expose children to heritage language books, movies, music videos and computer programs.
- Create opportunities for your child to have meaningful conversations with other speakers.



What can I do to help my child practice his/her native language after they entered school?

Studies show that children should have a solid base on his/her home language to better support school readiness. Once our child starts going to school, most of his environment will be in English, and the majority of the children with home languages other than English will eventually encounter some difficulty to relate to their home language, culture and families. To prevent this, research recommends:

- Speaking to our children in our home language as much as possible
- Encourage connections between the children and their home culture. Books, songs, food, are some ways to relate to our culture and could be used as a tool to help us maintain our first language.



Should I correct the errors my child makes when speaking, so he/she can learn to speak correctly?

Parents and family members can best support the language development of a child by focusing on what the child is trying to communicate rather than correcting the way the child speaks.

- One way to do it is to respond to what the child is trying to say using the correct grammatical structure in their response. When you correct the errors the child makes while trying to communicate, we disrupt their thought process. This shifts their thoughts to the words they are using rather than the message they are trying to convey.
- Finally, we can also use slightly more complex language that is still simple enough for the child to figure out.

What can I do when my kid brings a book in a language I cannot read?

The most meaningful way to share a book with your child is to create a conversation around it. If your child brings home a book in a different language, or without words, just look at the pictures and make up your own story. Every story will be fun and new for your child. You can incorporate some singing, rhyming, silly voices and movement, as well. It is all about having fun.



San Francisco and Alameda Counties