



# When Children Speak More Than One Language



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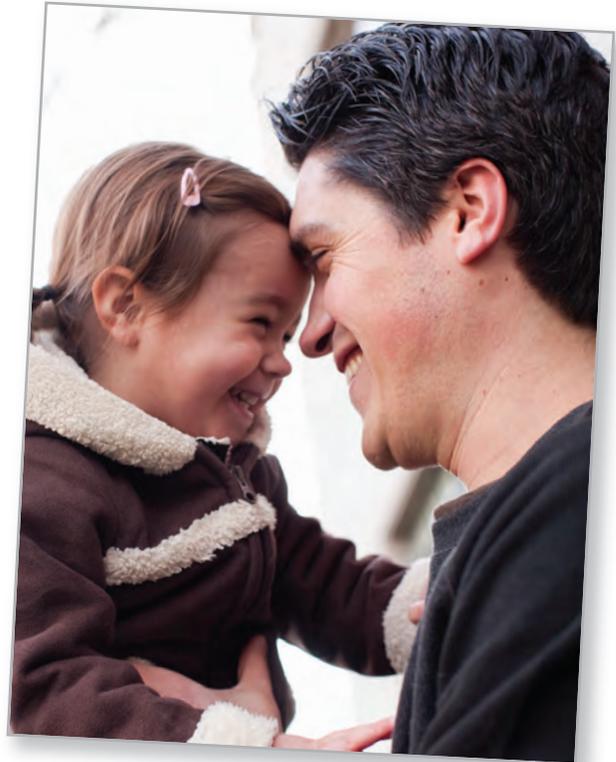
by/par health **nexus** santé

As a parent of a child who will learn two or more languages, you may have questions. This guide will give you information based on research to help you.

Language is the best tool to help your child do well later in school and in life.

Many children learn more than one language. Some learn even more than two. Studies show that children with better language skills, in any language, are more likely to:

- ◆ Develop their brain better.
- ◆ Have stronger bonds with their parents.
- ◆ Have better communication skills.
- ◆ Be better prepared for school.



## Learning Two Languages Can Happen at Any Age

Babies all over the world learn to speak two languages with success. Learning a second language can happen at any age (from birth or later) and in different environments (at home, at daycare, at school, in the community).

Bilingual babies and children reach language milestones at the same age as children learning one language. But don't expect that your child will immediately reach the same level of skills in both languages as a child who only has one language. Becoming bilingual takes time!

Studies show that the best time to learn two languages is before the age of 7. It is easier for children to learn two languages from birth. You can even start to expose children to two languages during pregnancy. When parents speak two languages their unborn baby hears a variety of sounds that prepare their brain to learn two languages.



Children learn language best from people who are fluent and who speak each language well.

Children learn language when they hear language often and they can practice language often.

## How Children Learn Two Languages

Learning two languages takes TIME and many OCCASIONS to practice. If your child is learning two languages or even a third, your child needs to hear other people USE each language often. Your child also needs to PRACTICE talking in each language.

Hearing adults talk is not enough to learn languages. Putting young children in front of screens (television, computer and electronic games) is not recommended. Children need to use the languages in day-to-day activities (e.g. while dressing, playing, going to the park) while having fun with people who care about them.

Talk to your child in the language that feels natural to you. Remember you are your child's greatest teacher. If you use your first language often and while having fun, your child will also want to use it.

### Choose the option that feels best for your family

**1. One parent-one language:** One parent speaks one language to the child; the other parent speaks the other language to the child.

**2. One place-one language:** One language is spoken at home; the other is spoken during the day at daycare or at school.

**3. One activity-one language:**

a. Both parents speak one language during the day and speak the other language in the evening.

b. One language is used often at home but the other is spoken during a short timed activity in the community (e.g. English story hour at the library once a week).

### Factors that help your child learn a second language

- ◆ Positive experiences
- ◆ Learning style
- ◆ Personality
- ◆ Attitude towards the other language
- ◆ Motivation to learn
- ◆ Quality of the language used by adults
- ◆ Amount of time hearing and talking each language

## The Different Ways Children Learn Two Languages

**Learning two languages at the same time from birth (simultaneous learning):**

Some children learn two languages before the age of 3.



*“My 18 month old daughter, Maria, has been learning Spanish and French since birth. I speak Spanish to her and her dad speaks French to her.*

*At 18 months, Maria has 30 words: 15 words in Spanish and 15 different words in French. This means she is using language well. Sometimes, she makes errors in both languages but it’s normal and expected when learning two languages at the same time.*

*We are so happy she is bilingual. Being able to speak French and Spanish is important to us. I know it helps her bond with her grandparents who speak mainly Spanish. It’s also fun for her since she can play with French and Spanish friends.”*

## Learning a second language after learning a first language (sequential learning):

Some children learn one language at a time. The second language is usually learned after the age of 3. The second language can be learned at daycare, at school or by a family member.

*“My son Chen is 3 years old. We spoke to him in Mandarin at home since birth. Five months ago, he started daycare where he is learning English as a second language.*

*At first, Chen used Mandarin words at the daycare. But none of the teachers could speak Mandarin. So, he stopped using it at the daycare and was quiet for about 4 months. At home, he talked all the time.*

*The teachers were not worried because they knew that he was trying to figure out how to use English. Many children learning a second language have a silent period that can last up to 6 months. After speaking with us, they also knew that, in Mandarin, Chen uses many words and speaks in 4 to 6 word sentences.*

*Lately, his teacher noticed that he is starting to use words like “Hi, Bye, cow, cat, blue, eat, thirsty” and little sentences (e.g. “don’t know”, “what’s that?”). We all know learning English will take some time and he will make mistakes, but we know that, very shortly, he will be able to use both languages well.”*



Each family must make the best decision based on their family life, their situation, their beliefs, their culture and their skills in each language. Once you decide, stick with your decision. It is the best one for your family!

## What to Expect When a Child Learns Two Languages



Learning two languages at home does not cause confusion or a language problem in young children. But, remember that children need to hear and practice speaking each language often to be good at it. Children learn language best from people who speak that language well. If parents don't speak English or French fluently, they should use their first language(s). Learning one language well is better than hearing and learning two languages poorly. By knowing a first language well, children can more easily learn a second language outside of their home like at daycare, school and other community programs.

Studies show that children with a language delay can also learn two languages. They do not become more delayed if they hear or learn two languages. However their speech and language difficulties will be heard in both languages. Even if your child has a language delay, continue using both languages. If you limit your child to one language, this may reduce your child's chances to talk, play and get to know other family members or people from the community.

It is normal for all children learning a second language to:

- ◆ **Use one language more than the other.** This happens when your child hears and speaks that language more often. If you and your partner speak two different languages, the “one parent-one language” approach may help your child get enough practice in both languages, especially when one language is spoken very little outside the home. Decide which language to use with family and friends.
- ◆ **Mix words from both languages in the same sentence.** In families using more than one language, adults and children sometimes switch back and forth between languages. If you switch between two languages, it may help to use the “one language-one activity” approach. When you hear your child mix the two languages, give your child the correct word to use. Switching between two languages will not cause a delay.
- ◆ **Make mistakes in the new language until they learn all the rules.** When your child makes mistakes (and it will happen), simply repeat back using the right words or a better sentence.
- ◆ **Lose the first language.** As children become better using a new language, they may want to stop using their first language. Even when your child has begun at daycare or school, keep talking to your child in your first language at home. Language is an important part of family life, traditions and culture. If a child loses their first language, this can impact his/her sense of identity. Plan activities in your first language with your family and your community. Reward your child’s efforts to use your first language with a “high-five”, a hug or a comment such “I love hearing you speak Cantonese.”

Remember, learning two languages takes time and practice. So, keep using your first language(s) at home. Talk about your child’s interests. Read, play and sing to help develop and keep your child’s first language.



Photo credit: Simon Blackley (CC)

## The Benefits of Learning Two Languages

Learning two languages is like a mental work-out; it boosts brain power. Studies show that being bilingual makes the brain stronger, mainly in the areas of LANGUAGE, MEMORY and ATTENTION.

### Children who learn two languages:

- ◆ Have better language & listening skills.
- ◆ Are better at reading and writing.
- ◆ Are more creative.
- ◆ Are better at multitasking skills.
  - ◆ Have a sharper memory.
  - ◆ Are better at solving problems.
- ◆ Have a chance to make more friends.
- ◆ Find better jobs later in life.



## Strategies



### Talk to Your Child in Your First Language

- ◆ Talking with your child in your first language gives your child the best language model. You can better explain ideas, use more complicated words, share jokes, ask questions and be more spontaneous in your first language.
- ◆ Keep speaking your first language, even if your child starts daycare or school and even when he/she answers in another language.
- ◆ When your child starts daycare or school, share words from your first language with the teacher that your child may use to talk about needs or feelings (e.g., “water”, “hurt”, “potty”). This helps the teacher understand your child.
- ◆ Talk about your family and your culture with your child. Talk about recent or past family events and about traditional music, clothing or food.



### Read Books in Your First Language

- ◆ Read books often. Read to them in your first language.
- ◆ Tell stories that you have learned as a child in your first language. Books and storytelling help children develop listening, thinking, language and reading skills.
- ◆ Talk about the pictures in the book. Take turns talking about these pictures. Your child will learn new words in your first language.
- ◆ Keep reading materials around the house (comic books, magazines, cereal boxes).
- ◆ Get a library card and visit the library often. Books are available in a variety of languages.



### Play and Sing With Your Child in Your First Language

- ◆ When your child plays, he/she learns to take turns, follow directions and use words in his/her first language while having fun.
- ◆ Meet with friends and family to give your child more chances to use his/her first language in fun activities.
- ◆ Sing traditional songs in your first language. Explain new words and talk about the meaning behind the songs.
- ◆ Listen to songs and music in your first language or both languages, over and over. Children learn from and love the repetition.
- ◆ Look for children’s programs in community centres or at the library that offer activities in your first language.

## Resources

**Preschool Speech and Language Program:** If you are concerned about your child's communication skills, contact your local program.

[www.children.gov.on.ca/htdocs/English/topics/earlychildhood/speechlanguage/locations.aspx](http://www.children.gov.on.ca/htdocs/English/topics/earlychildhood/speechlanguage/locations.aspx)

**Ministry of Children and Youth services:** This website gives information in 16 different languages on milestones and tips to help your child learn language.

[www.children.gov.on.ca/htdocs/English/topics/earlychildhood/speechlanguage/index.aspx](http://www.children.gov.on.ca/htdocs/English/topics/earlychildhood/speechlanguage/index.aspx)

**Nipissing District Developmental Screen (NDDS):** Developmental checklists for infants and children up to 6 years of age and activities tips are available on this website. The checklists are available in English, French, Spanish, Chinese and Vietnamese.

[www.ndds.ca/ontario.html](http://www.ndds.ca/ontario.html)

**Best Start Resource Centre:** This website offers many resources for parents and some are in multiple languages.

[www.beststart.org/resources/hlthy\\_chld\\_dev/index.html](http://www.beststart.org/resources/hlthy_chld_dev/index.html)

- ◆ **Growing up in a new land:** a guide for newcomer parents. See pages 16-18.
- ◆ **Learning to Play and Playing to Learn:** What Families Can do. See page 14 and beyond on information about school readiness and language development.

**Bilingual monkeys:** For ideas and inspirations for raising bilingual kids (without going bananas). [www.bilingualmonkeys.com/my-materials/](http://www.bilingualmonkeys.com/my-materials/)

**Multilingual living:** Discusses reasons why you should help children learn a language when they are very young.

[www.multilingualliving.com/](http://www.multilingualliving.com/)

**Fédération des parents francophones de Colombie-Britannique:**

A range of resources and references about bilingual language development in young children living in minority settings.

<http://developpement-langagier.fpcfbc.ca/en>

**Ontario Early Years Centre:** Location of the Early Years Centres. To find the nearest location.

[www.oeyc.edu.gov.on.ca/locations/index.aspx](http://www.oeyc.edu.gov.on.ca/locations/index.aspx)

**Ontario Public Health Units:** To reach a Public Health Nurse and to learn more about activities and supports in your community.

[www.health.gov.on.ca/en/common/system/services/phu/locations.aspx](http://www.health.gov.on.ca/en/common/system/services/phu/locations.aspx)



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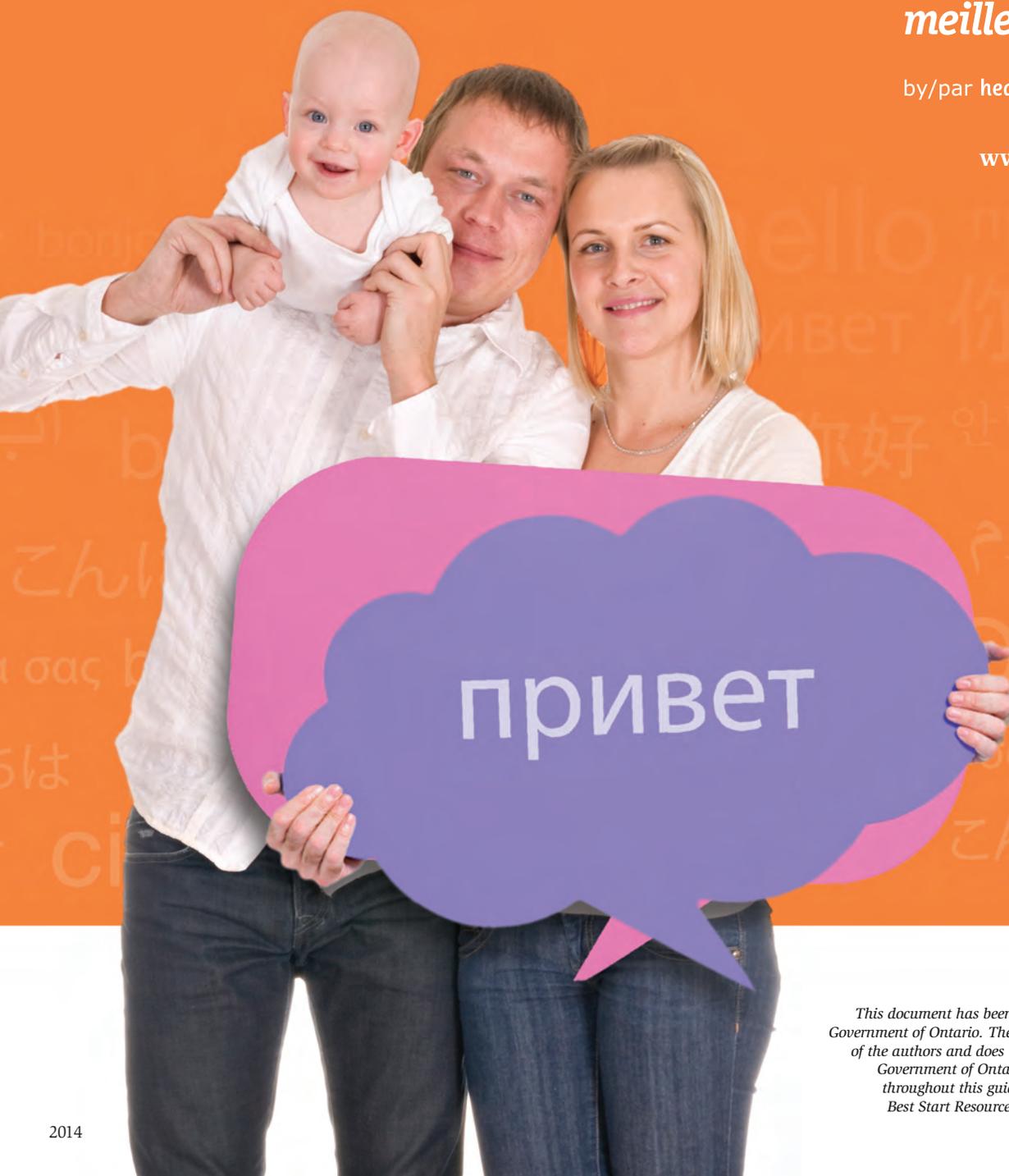
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