

Raising a **Bilingual Child**

Tips to get your little linguist learning.

BY PAULA KEHOE



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Yulia Svela, a nurse and mother of two, has firsthand experience learning a second language at a young age. Born in Russia, she moved with her family to Canada when she was nine where she picked up English as a second language.

Yulia felt it was important to teach her sons about her Russian culture and heritage, so she began speaking Russian exclusively to them at home as soon as they were born. “Maintaining her native language will help the boys value where their mother comes from, and it’s important for their future,” says Ian Svela, Yulia’s husband.

Ian, an elementary school French teacher, is anglophone and primarily responsible for the boys English-language acquisition. Having been exposed to Russian over the years helps him keep up with the conversations in their home.

Their eldest son, Ivan, 22-months-old, attends a Russian-speaking daycare that includes at least one hour a day of English instruction. “Even though Ivan comprehends instructions given in Russian, the words he has chosen to say recently are predominantly in English because they are easier to pronounce. But he’s developing his Russian-language skills rapidly and quickly absorbs what

he hears,” says Ian. “The cool thing is that he uses Russian words correctly and interchangeably with English.”

Clear benefits

According to the 2011 report *Linguistic Characteristics of Canadians*, 17.5% of Canadians, or 5.8 million people, reported speaking at least two languages at home. In these households bilingualism can be a necessity, as a child’s parents may not be fluent in the dominant language in the community. But sometimes parents choose to expose their child to another language even if they don’t speak that second language themselves. Increasing

numbers of parents in Canada are realizing the advantages of learning both official languages and are enrolling their children in French Immersion programs.

Whatever the reason for exposing your child to a second language, the benefits are clear. Children who are exposed to several languages, even if only during the first years of life, have enhanced cognitive abilities that boost problem-solving skills, memory, and self-discipline, as well as better concentration, greater creativity, cultural awareness, multitasking skills, and advantages in finding jobs later in life.

If you're wondering how you can raise a bilingual child, here are some practical tips to keep in mind.

Start early. "Parents can begin exposing their child to more than one language at any age. However, the earlier they start, the more proficient they become," says Ellen Bialystok, a neuroscientist and professor of psychology at Toronto's York University, who has researched the effect of bilingualism on childhood development. Bialystok recommends that parents begin introducing their child to the minority language as soon as he or she is born when they can already recognize speech patterns and unique sounds.



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"When you speak the language, your child is soaking it in even though they're not yet able to speak it back."

Speak often to your child. No matter which language you want your child to learn, he or she does need to hear it consistently. "The most important thing in any language acquisition is communication," says Bialystok. "Speak to your child as much as possible, and in a natural, happy and an engaging way."

Have a plan. Two common strategies are the "one person, one language" approach (where each parent speaks his or her mother tongue) and the "minority language at home" approach (where both parents use the minority language at home and the majority language is acquired from the community). Whatever approach you choose, it's important to make sure that the child naturally needs to use the minority language and receives sufficient daily input in that language. Bialystok also notes that there's no evidence a child will become confused if a parent speaks to them in more than one language. "They know exactly which language is which," she says.

Be patient. As with most aspects of parenting, raising bilingual kids is a long-term commitment. Don't worry if your child doesn't speak his multiple languages as quickly or as adeptly as his peers. Instead focus upon his successes and marvel at the development of his little brain.

Expect small mix-ups. It's natural for a child to use words from both languages in the same sentence. She'll quickly learn to separate the languages.

Don't underestimate your little one's progress. Even though many people think learning two languages causes speech delays, that's not the case. Your child might say fewer English words than other kids his age, but if you add in the words he knows in his second language, his total number of words will probably be more than that of his peers.

Reinforcement helps. Learning a new language works best when it's heard in a variety of environments. "Speaking it a few hours a week isn't enough, and TV isn't particularly effective," says Bialystok. Reading, and interactive or social activity (like playdates with other kids who speak the language) are best. Toys, books and music in your minority language will also boost your child's exposure.

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DIY Bilingualism

Here are other ways to encourage your child to become bilingual:

- Take a vacation to a country where the desired language is spoken for an opportunity at full immersion.
- Watch a favourite movie, like *Frozen*, in French after your child has already familiarized themselves with the story line in English.
- Listen to age-appropriate music for infants and toddlers in the second language, which may be readily available at your local library.
- Use bilingual toys, such as those available through LeapFrog, which are a great way to plant the seed for interest in a second language.
- Download a bilingual digital app like MindSnacks. From basic vocabulary through to more complex phrases, spelling and grammar, games can keep your kid engaged and motivated.
- Hang a bilingual word-a-day chalkboard in an area in your home with high visibility. Add a different word to

it in both languages every day and discuss that word with your kids.

- Find your child's favourite recipe or a typical recipe from your community and cook it together using a second language.
- Practice ordering food at a restaurant specializing in cuisine associated with the language.
- Label household objects in the minority language, and practice identifying them.
- Help your child find an overseas pen pal to help them practice their language skills.
- Celebrate holidays in a country of interest and have a party. This will give your kid a chance to learn about the history and traditions associated with that day and share it with their friends. Chef up some traditional foods, watch YouTube videos of the celebrations in that country, listen to traditional music, dress up in costumes, and just have fun with it.

The key is to expose your child to the target language as often as possible and encourage an interactive environment. Even knowing a little bit goes a long way!