

SECTION

C

Questions About Problems

C1: What are the disadvantages of my child becoming bilingual?

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There are always worries and anxieties in a child's physical, social, personality and health development. There is no such a thing as a trouble-free child. Therefore, raising children to speak two languages is not going to be trouble free. There are going to be times when parents will worry about the language development of their children.

Whenever there is a language, educational or social problem, many parents of bilingual children tend to think of bilingualism as a possible cause of the problem. If a child lacks success at school, the parent of the monolingual child may lay the blame with the child's motivation, personality, the standard of teaching or the school itself. The parent of the bilingual child may think of all these causes, but add on the child's bilingualism as another major potential cause.

If a child does have social, motivational, educational or personal problems, don't immediately focus on bilingualism or biculturalism as the first cause. Rarely will this be so. Try to hunt down a variety of possible causes and not just highlight language. Discuss the problems with friends, the child's teacher and the child. All too often bilingualism is wrongly blamed for whatever problem occurs.

It would be misleading to suggest that there are never any disadvantages to bilingualism. First, there will be a disadvantage if a child's two languages are both **underdeveloped**. The most crucial definition of underdevelopment is that a child is unable to cope in the curriculum in the school in either language. This very rarely occurs, but it is important to avoid. The more usual situation is that bilingualism gives the child marginal advantages over the monolingual child in the curriculum.*

Some children who have been raised as bilingual from birth will not necessarily speak both languages as children or teenagers. Professor Annick De Houwer,

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an expert on childhood bilingualism (see reference at the end) found that one in five children who grew up bilingually from birth do not speak one language. This 20% of children in her 2500 sample understood both languages, but only spoke one. This must still be considered success and not failure. The 'passive' language can easily be activated into speaking given the right context and language immersion experiences (e.g. when visiting family on vacations).

A **second** potential problem parents experience is the **amount of effort** often required to raise bilingual children. Parental effort is required in a persistent and consistent manner and this can sometimes be emotionally demanding, pressured and stressful. It may even result in feeling a failure if perfect bilingualism does not occur. In reality, this effort tends to come more from mothers than fathers, but not in all cases. As research among Japanese / English families by Toshie Okita (2002) found:

raising children bilingually in intermarried families is emotionally demanding work . . . they had to carefully organise their social environment, control their child's use of time . . . 'constant reminding' (to use Japanese) . . . they had to balance various needs or demands, of which their chance Japanese language development was only one . . . Mothers had their own needs as well . . . wanted time to relax, too, to 'be themselves' rather than a home language teacher . . . If they failed to balance all these demands, the whole fabric of their family life could crumble. Balancing them was emotionally demanding, especially when mothers could see that maintaining a balance would result in reduced use of the minority language. (pp. 224–225)

Parents need to engineer thoughtfully and creatively their child's bilingual development, and this takes effort. It is not like scattering a few seeds on the ground and expecting swift, strong and simple growth. The tender language shoots need to be nourished, the garden well fertilized in order for later blossoming to occur. As the seasons of language development change, the parent has constantly to tend the language garden.

Not all agree with this. Some will argue that the 'amount of effort' issue in raising bilingual children is over-management of children in a period of their lives that should be carefree, joyful and creative. Such critics suggest that carefully managing all aspects of a child's life is 'hyper-parenting'. Hyper-parenting means the precise and detailed management of children's lives to maximize their success along parent-defined outcomes. Alongside the fetus listening to music in the womb, swimming from birth, engaging with reading and numbers before walking, producing bilingual children in elite families is seen by critics as driven by the need for parent accomplishment. This seems hyper-critical. It fails to understand the sheer pleasure that children gain from music, swimming, reading and writing, and not least from being bilingual.

Third, raising children can be demanding. Teething, infant illnesses, crying, colic, eating little, poor sleep patterns, 'bad' behaviour, unlimited exploration of

everywhere when crawling and walking, each and all can make parenthood hard work. Adding bilingualism to the list can, for some families, seem like adding another problem. For example, supporting a child's bilingualism may mean organizing plenty of opportunities to use the weaker language. That takes time and effort.

Another instance of the demands of child bilingualism is a potential tension between loving and warm communication between parent and child, and the constant monitoring, and even correcting, of two languages. At one point the parent is encouraging and kind; at the same moment there is a need to instruct (e.g. reminding the child to speak German and not English). Parents may feel pulled emotionally in different directions, and feel they cannot get it right whatever they do.

An example is sometimes found among language minorities in the US or United Kingdom. The first language may be, for example, Arabic or Welsh, with English as the second language. The parents and child are criticized by some in the community (e.g. English language monolinguals) for the child having imperfect English, *and* criticized by others (e.g. language minority members) for making the child too American or British. The parents are criticized from two opposing perspectives: for not being sufficiently loyal to a heritage culture, religion or identity, and for the child's English language not being sufficiently perfect. The result can be despairing parents.

Occasionally, bilingual child-rearing introduces arguments in a marriage. If the husband does not understand the communication between mother and child, is there a feeling of exclusion? Competing marriage and child-rearing demands on such a mother can be emotionally draining. Such mothers have to balance competing pressures and priorities. Managing the development of two languages is just one aspect of family life. Languages are just one aspect of child-rearing and cannot be easily divorced from other family decisions, pressures and even conflicts. There is also a danger if language(s) are seen as the work of the mother, even to the point of making the mother stay at home.

For some parents, the route children take to full bilingualism is relatively straightforward. For others, there are moments of concern, where challenges seem more like problems. Just as the hard work of digging, applying manure and weeding in the garden eventually produce beautiful blooms, so with the language garden. The individual, cognitive, social, cultural, intellectual and economic advantages given to the child via bilingualism make the spadework and effort spent in sowing and cultivating all worthwhile.

A **fourth** problem area tends to be with the **identity** of the child. If the child speaks English and French fluently, are they French, English or Anglo-French? If a child speaks English and a minority language such as Welsh, are they Welsh, English, British, European, Anglo-Welsh or what?

For many parents and children, identity is not a problem. While speaking two languages, they are predominantly identified with one ethnic or cultural group. For example, many German/English bilinguals from Germany may see themselves as German first, possibly European, but not English. Being able to speak the English language is important to them. However, to be considered as 'English' would be an insult.

At the other end of the spectrum is the immigrant. Sometimes the first or second generation immigrant desperately wants to identify with majority language people and culture. They may actively want to lose the identity of their home or heritage language (see Glossary). For example, in the US, Spanish speakers from Mexico or Cuba or Puerto Rico may want to assimilate and become monolingual English-speaking North Americans.

Between the two opposites presented above, there are potential cases of **identity crisis and conflict**.^{*} There are some bilinguals who feel both English and French, Spanish and Basque, Mexican and North American. There are some people who feel quite happy being culturally hyphenated (e.g. Anglo-German, Chinese-Canadians, Italian-Americans). There will be others who feel uncomfortable moving between two identities. Bilinguals may ask: Am I Asian or am I British or am I Asian-British? Am I Swedish, am I Finnish or am I Swedish-Finnish? Am I Chinese from China, like the Chinese scattered throughout the world, or a Canadian? Am I Italian, North American or some integrated or uneasy combination of these?

Such identity conflicts are not inevitably the result of owning two languages. However, languages are clearly a contributor. Languages provide the potentiality of mingling in two or more cultures, of thinking and acting in two different ethnic groups, of identifying with each group or neither group. Language is a vehicle through which an **identity tension** may arise. It is important to be honest and not to suggest that everything in the garden is perfect. Self-identity, cultural identity and ethnic identity (see Glossary) can be a problem for some bilinguals.*

Fifth, a family does not live separately from the rest of the world. There are relatives, social friends, work colleagues, communities, societies and nations that all influence family lives. We are not autonomous individuals who make decisions about languages in the family in a vacuum. Others have a powerful influence on us. Such 'others' may be, for example, the extended family, religion, mass media and dominant language politics in a region. Even when parents feel it would be valuable to raise their children bilingually, the force of opinion outside the family (socially, economically, politically) may make that decision too nonconforming.

In conclusion, a danger can be having too high expectations of success. There is an **idealized** scenario that is sometimes impossible to achieve: both parents being fluently bilingual and with highly positive attitudes to bilingualism; friends, family and others are encouraging and have positive experiences themselves; the children richly experience both languages in the home, school and community; children becoming proficient in both languages for life and using each for vary-

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ing purposes; parents celebrating bilingualism and their children feeling it to be a wonderful personal advantage.

Realities are rarely this simple. More usual is a scenario that includes some of the following: one parent is not fluent in a family language; both parents having worries about eventual success in producing bilingual children; one parent has more concerns than the other and sometimes feels marginalized in conversation; one parent feels the burden of raising bilinguals is placed on them and it is emotionally draining; those outside the home being critical; language experience across the two languages being imbalanced and changing across time; children having one stronger and one weaker language; children changing their attitudes to, and use of, their two languages; periods of refusal by the child to speak a language; the future of languages across the lifetime not being predictable.

Further Reading:

Annick De Houwer (2009) *An Introduction to Bilingual Development*. Multilingual Matters. <http://www.multilingual-matters.com/>

Toshie Okita (2002) *Bilingualism, Language Choice and Childrearing in Intermarried Families*. John Benjamins Publishing Company.

C2: My child mixes the two languages. What should I do?

Consider yourself a very typical family. There are probably only a few bilingual families where the child does not mix the two languages, at the very least in the early stages. Moving between two languages is very normal in bilingual children and adults.

Language mixing is given other labels:

translanguaging*;
transference (transfer between two languages);
code-mixing; code-switching; and
interference (see Glossary) between languages. This is now regarded as a disparaging and injurious term that is inaccurate in its view of how bilinguals use their languages.

Many people are concerned about the purity of a language – language standardization. Listening to a person mixing two languages is anathema to the purist. While the purity of a language is an important issue, from the child's point of view, any language mixing helps the message to be communicated and understood. While hybrid languages (e.g. constantly mixing Spanish and English) may be temporary (e.g. in early childhood), they can also occasionally be relatively

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stable and shared by a large group (e.g. the mixing of Spanish and English in certain parts of New York).

Mixing is **typical** and to be expected in the **early stages** of bilingual development. However, some parents do not like to hear children mixing two languages. Others are more tolerant, because in the company of other bilinguals, they switch languages themselves.

Parents can help in the process of language separation by various **dos and don'ts**. The most important is to avoid criticizing, or constantly pointing out mistakes, revealing anxiety and concern. This is unlikely to have a positive effect on a child's language development. On the contrary, it is more likely to make the child inhibited in language, anxious about their bilingualism and may slow down language development. A constant focus on language correctness and form is unnatural for the child, who is more interested in facts and ideas, stories and activities. For the child **language is a means to an end**, not an end in itself. Language is a vehicle to help move along the road of information exchange and social communication.

Whether or not a young bilingual mixes two languages may be affected by differing factors such as:

- the amount of separation a child experiences in listening to the two languages (different people and in different contexts);
- the balance of the two languages in the child's home and community life;
- the quantity of language experience in both languages;
- the quality of language experience;
- parental acceptance (or not) of mixing the two languages; and the experience of mixing in the community.

Parents can also ensure that **language boundaries** are mostly kept. A parent who speaks one sentence in French to a child, the next sentence in English, may lately be teaching the child that languages can be mixed. However, children tend to learn quickly with whom they can code-switch, and with whom they should use one language almost solely.

One form of language separation is the **one parent—one language strategy**. Each parent speaks a different language to the child (see Section A8, page 17). An alternative is if both parents only use one particular language, with the other language used in different contexts (e.g. in the school, for religion, in the mass media, in the community). When language is separated along divisions of different people, different contexts, even different times of the week or day, a child is learning that language compartmentalisation exists. Mixing may still occur early