

Help! **Is my child speaking correctly?**



A guide to your child's language learning

Includes fun games and activities to play with your child!



Introduction

In a multi-ethnic country like Singapore, parents are often confused as to which languages and how much of each language their child should learn. Parents are not sure which language they should use to speak or to teach their child.

With this booklet, parents should be able to clear up several myths about learning more than one language as well as gain knowledge on how to teach their children languages.

Parents should also realise that there are many benefits to learning two languages and that bilingualism is highly encouraged for every child.



How does a child learn a new language?

Every child has the ability to pick up new languages whenever they want to. However, how fast they pick up a language is entirely dependent on their individual abilities.

There could be 'windows' of opportunities for children to learn faster but the most important thing when teaching a child a new language is the child's exposure and motivation.

When the child is exposed constantly to the language and has the opportunities to practice speaking, later on reading and writing, the language, it is very likely that the child is able to learn faster.





Will too many languages confuse the child?

Some parents are afraid of teaching both the mother tongue and English at the same time to the child because they fear that their child would be confused between the two languages. Fret not, children have the ability to differentiate the two languages apart.



Children are extremely sensitive to the different languages they hear when people speak. They are most likely able to tell the differences between languages, sometimes even the differences between formal and informal speech!

You might notice that your child is mixing words from each language to form coherent sentences when talking to you: that is the phenomenon called code-mixing. They are switching languages within sentences at appropriate points when they speak. Such a situation occurs commonly among bilinguals during the learning phase.



This does not signify that their vocabulary is weaker than monolinguals. It shows that they have the ability to switch between the two languages skilfully, knowing when they are able and when they are unable to switch.[1].

[1] For more information on code-mixing and also code-switching, one can search for "Children with two languages" written by Barbara Zurer Pearson



Will too many languages confuse the child?

Similarly, if your child has picked up one language after another, there is a possibility that they might have a 'silent period'. This phenomenon happens because your child is trying to adapt and learn how to use the new language. Your child may be quiet when they are in the environment that they need to speak the new language but continue to speak normally in the environment where they learnt the first language.



Such situations happen when the child only learnt one language at home and is taught another when they start attending school. You should attempt to speak the taught language if you can to the child, allowing them to get used to hearing and speaking the language.



Taking it into the Singaporean context

In the case of the current generation of Chinese parents, most children learn English as their home language, with the sparse use of Mandarin or dialect by grandparents. Chinese is usually taught after the child has entered school.

On the other hand, Malay and Indian parents are likely to teach Melayu and Tamil or Punjabi to their children before sending them to school to learn English. Children spend on average 3 to 4 hours at the kindergarten, implying longer hours at home^[2]. The chances of them being better at the language they learnt at home is higher.



[2] Preschool Singapore | Preschool in Singapore Statistics Infographic. (2017). Skoolopedia. Retrieved 9 November 2017, from <https://skoolopedia.com/preschool-singapore-2015-infographic/>



Taking it into the Singaporean context

According to MOE's website[3], kindergarten hours are on average 4 hours while childcare hours are as long as 12 hours.

As such, children spend more time at home, which indicates that they could be better at the language learnt at home rather than the language taught in kindergarten or childcare. One such example would be the Malay and Indian children.

Most of the Malay parents speak only Malay to their children, where their children can only reply in Malay, hence the stronger ability in their Mother Tongue.



[3] Our Programmes - Kindergarten Care | MOE Kindergarten. (2017). Moe.gov.sg Retrieved 11 November 2017, from <https://www.moe.gov.sg/microsites/moekindergarten/our-programmes/kindergarten-care.html>

Which language should I use to speak to my child?

If you are wondering which language is the best language to speak to your child, do not be worried. Most bilinguals have a dominant language, which can be either English or the M.T. The language you speak, write and read more often is usually the dominant language.

As such, you are most likely to speak to your child in this dominant language more frequently. However, if you have intentions to teach your child both languages, do switch around with both languages as you play with your child.



Taking this into the Singaporean context

Most Singaporean children tend to learn a minimum of 2 languages, English and their Mother Tongue (Chinese, Bahasa Melayu or Tamil), with Mandarin being the most common Mother Tongue taught due to population demographics.

Some families also choose to let their child pick up a third language, which can be languages such as German, Japanese, or another one of the Mother Tongues that is not correlated to the child's ethnic group.





Should you choose to only speak 1 language to your child?

01

Many myths speak of the confusion that children might get from the usage of multiple languages but we now know that is not true.

02

There are parents who choose to separately teach the languages to their child, with one parent teaching one language. While it is a feasible method, there are possible repercussions. Your child may end up speaking to you only in the language you taught them. Your child may be confused when you speak the non-dominant language to your spouse. Similarly, if one parent inputs with higher quantity and quality, the child may experience being weaker in the language with less quantity and quality input (Huttenlocher et. al, 1991).

Bilingual House

**30 thousand more
words than
monolinguals per day**





What can I do to help my child learn a language?

Many parents, including you reading this booklet, wish to help your own child to improve in the languages they are learning. There are many ways to help your child learn a language. Below are some activities that you can try to enhance the quality of the interactions you have with your child.

The activities should help the child to learn more about each language, as well as how both languages connect with each other.

By the end of the activities, parents should also be able to understand that children can tell the difference between two language systems and that it is fine for them to learn two languages at the same time.



ACTIVITY BOOKLET





THE 'FIS' FISH

FROM 6 MONTHS OLD

Many parents speak to their baby frequently, in a simplified and repetitive manner, often in an exaggerated intonation and rhythm. The purpose of this activity is to ensure that your child is able to recognise the different pronunciations for each language.

For this activity, parents will need to spend 5-10 minutes each day, repeating specific pronunciations that are special to the languages they want their child to learn. Here is an example for Chinese parents.

1. Banana, Papaya
2. [bā-bā]
(father), 怕怕 [pà-pà]
(scared)

Did you know that all children are able to differentiate all kinds of sounds and pronunciation before they turn 6 months old? Most children are able to pick up the smallest of differences in pronunciations, making it easier to learn the languages subsequently.

In the first list, banana and papaya will allow the child to learn the difference between 'b' and 'p' in English. The second list will then add on, with the inclusion of father, which has a stronger 'b' sound in comparison to 'banana' followed by the word 'scared', which has an airier 'p' sound compared to papaya. With these four words, the child will learn that there is a difference between these pronunciations and will be more sensitive to these pronunciations. Similar sounds would be the differences between 't' and 'd', or 'k' and 'g'.



THE 'FIS' FISH

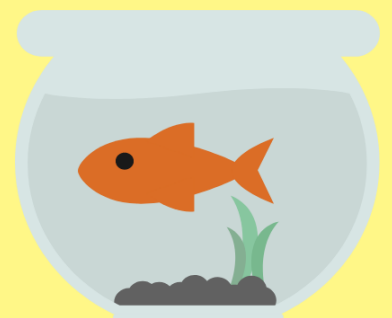
FROM 6 MONTHS OLD

As the child grows older, parents can also try adding in 'chair' and 'fish', where the 'ch' and 'sh' sounds are harder to replicate. Below is another example for Chinese parents.

1. Chair, Cheese, Fish, Dish

2. 吃 [chī] (eat), 去 [qù] (go), 湿 [shī] (wet), 水 [shuǐ] (water)

Progressively, the child should be able to pronounce different pronunciations according to each language.





SING-ALONG SONG

FROM 12 MONTHS OLD

At this age, children are eager to learn and can absorb new knowledge very quickly. By incorporating language learning in songs, the children will be able to enhance their enunciation skills as well as learn how to form basic phrases and sentences.

For English songs, the alphabet song is highly recommended as it is the start of learning English. If possible, get your child to repeat after you. Parents can pause at times or repeat a certain part of the song to prompt your child to repeat after you. In the alphabet song, you can pause at these timings. The pauses are timed to allow the child to learn part by part, as the pauses follow the beat and rhythm of the song, making it easier for the child to absorb and recognise the tone and stresses of each letter.





LEARN AND 学

FROM 18 MONTHS OLD

To test if your child is not confused between the languages you have tried teaching them, try out this activity!

1. Show your child the picture of pig with the English word 'pig'. Tell the child that this is a 'pig'. Make your child repeat after you.
2. Show your child the other picture with the Chinese word for 'pig'. Tell the child that this is also 'pig'. Make the child repeat after you.
3. Put the picture of the 'pig', covering the words. Ask the child what the picture is. If they answer the English word, prompt them for the Chinese word. If they answer the Chinese word, prompt them for the English word.
4. If they are able to answer in both English and Chinese, they are showing signs that they can differentiate the two languages.

PIG



**猪
(zhū)**





READING OUT LOUD

FROM 24 MONTHS OLD

Many parents read books to their children. However, in this activity, parents should find books that have Mother Tongue equivalents or English equivalent.



Once upon a time there was an old pig with three little pigs, and one day she said to them: "My children, it is time for you to go out in the world and seek your fortunes". So, bidding their mother goodbye, the three little pigs set out to earn their living.

Example: of children's story in English (Three Little Pigs)



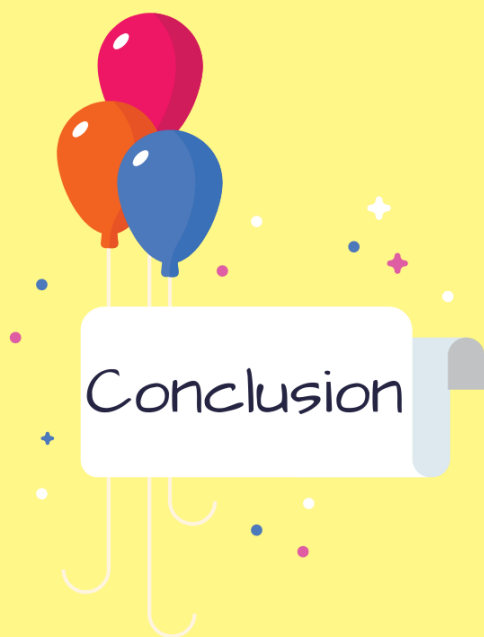
READING OUT LOUD

FROM 24 MONTHS OLD

When reading the book, remember to point at the pictures, to let them recognise the characters. By matching what they are looking to what they are hearing, it is easier for them to remember the vocabulary.



Example of children's story in Chinese (Three Little Pigs)



Conclusion

After reading this booklet, parents should be able to help their child learn languages as well as provide an environment that is conducive for language learning. It is essential that parents become the helping hands for the child to learn a language, for language is the most important tool for communication. With great language skills come great communication, eventually forging better relationships between parent and child.

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