

# Dialects, really?

A parent's guide



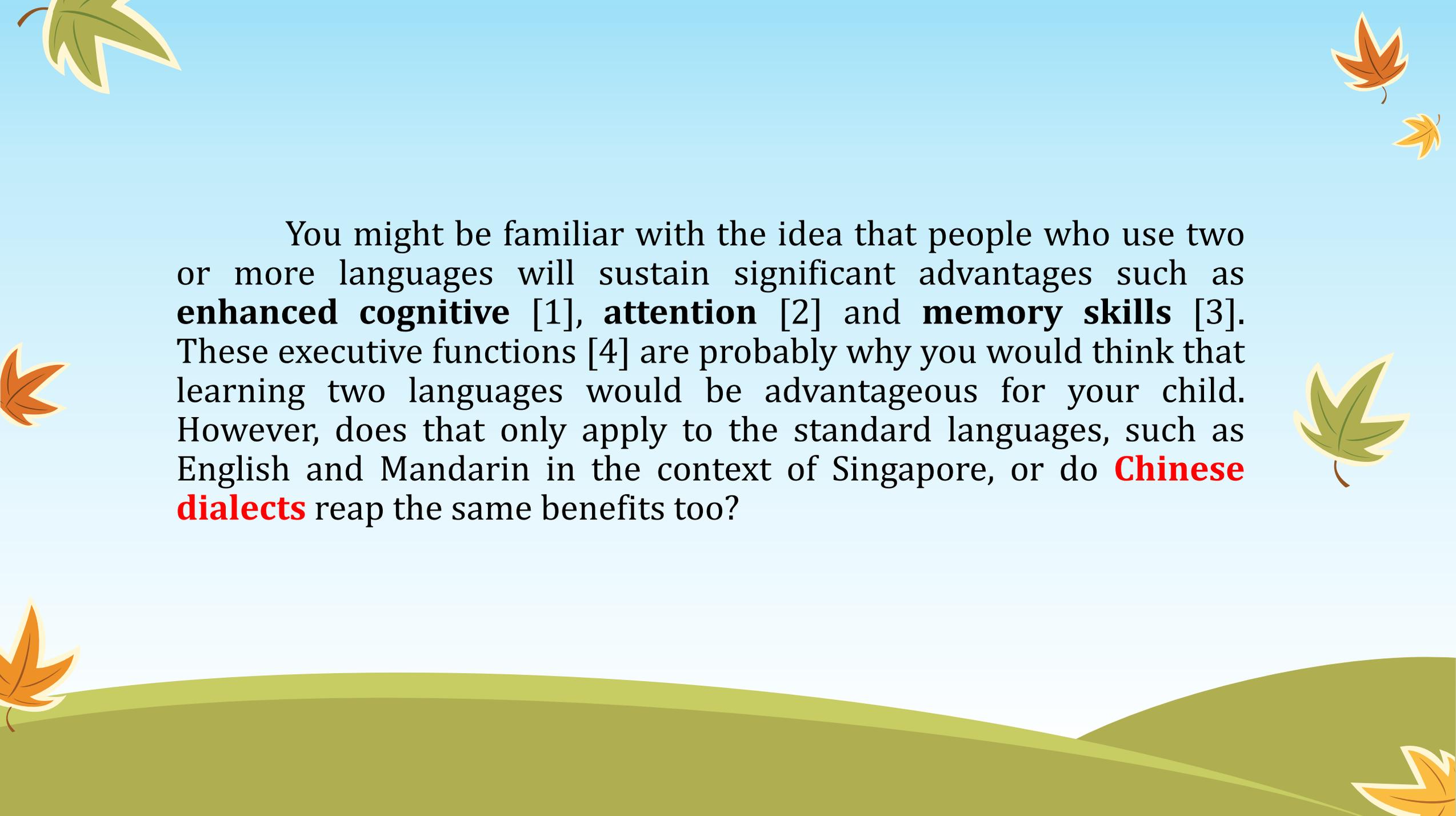
Dear parents,

This parent information booklet focuses on home language use in the context of Singapore. Some questions that you, as a care giver, might have regarding the language development of your 0-5-year old child are: Should I speak my dialect to my child? Would mastering a dialect hinder my child's academic development? What proportion of time should I cater to each language use at home? What are some ways to make learning dialect and other languages fun?

Through this booklet, we aim to provide some tips for you and clear some doubts and misconceptions about your child's language development. Most importantly, we hope that you can develop a better understanding about language use and speak to your child more freely in your comfortable languages to create a better and natural learning environment for your child.

Sincerely,  
Leung Kai Yan



The slide features a light blue background with several stylized autumn leaves in shades of green, orange, and yellow scattered around the edges. At the bottom, there are rolling green hills. The text is centered in a black serif font.

You might be familiar with the idea that people who use two or more languages will sustain significant advantages such as **enhanced cognitive** [1], **attention** [2] and **memory skills** [3]. These executive functions [4] are probably why you would think that learning two languages would be advantageous for your child. However, does that only apply to the standard languages, such as English and Mandarin in the context of Singapore, or do **Chinese dialects** reap the same benefits too?



## Question 1: 'Should I avoid using dialects to my child?'

Do you know that dialects are also **another source of brain-training** in language use? Recent research has found that children who speak any two dialects – which are two closely related varieties with subtle linguistic differences of the same language, may experience **similar cognitive advantages** as multilingual children who speak two or more different languages such as English and French [4].

Dialects are just as rich and complex as standard languages. The difference between dialects and languages usually involves historical and administrative prestige which labels them with different status. This is the reason why standard languages are usually encouraged in school and work places while the local variant is reserved as a home language. However, you might not be necessarily benefiting your child by avoiding the use of dialects and speak only the standard. Contrary to belief, **avoiding might be diminishing your child's opportunities** to acquire your dialect without comparable benefit to the acquisition of a standard language [5]!



## Question 1: 'Should I avoid using dialects to my child?'

If you are wondering about passing on a dialect to your child with the above concerns, there is really **no one-size fits all answer**.

However, it would be beneficial to dispose the 'language vs dialect' paradigm for the moment and see **what they need exposure on**, and **what would be useful** for your child as they grow up.

Despite that the current generation is speaking less dialects compared to the past as a result of globalisation – 12.2% reported mostly using Chinese dialects at home, a drop from 14.3% in 2010 and 18.2% in 2005 [6, 7, 8], ultimately, there is still a cultural baggage that dialects hold.

As parents, you might also need to consider the impact for your child if they do not have access to a part of who they are, or their **cultural roots**. Bringing it closer to individual homes, the phenomenon of dialect deaths among the younger generation would also bring possible generational rifts as your child might struggle to communicate with their grandparents if one could only speak the standard and the other only dialects [9].



## Question 2:

# 'My child would be confused between dialects and other languages!'



Studies have shown that most infants are **able to differentiate their two home languages** at around 4 months of age [10]. Also, infants as young as 18-30 months are able to arrange different sets of rules in languages that they learn systematically [11] and **process them efficiently and accurately**. This ability to set apart languages at a young age shows that they have large learning capacities to make sense of the complexities of languages. Moreover, a study done by Singh (2011) has found that children could even translate between languages within a very short time from their dominant language to their non-dominant language when they are at 30 months old [11]. This suggests that not only are young children clearly aware of what they are hearing, but they are also able to pick up both languages naturally because their brains can handle **more than one language input**, provided sufficient input of sufficient quality [5].



Furthermore, it is very natural for your child to be confused when they first start, just as a monolingual child would. For example, it is very common for a monolingual English learning child to confuse 'he' and 'she' even when they are only learning one language. As normal as it gets, **making errors are part and parcel of language acquisition** and it reflects your child's progress in his/her language competence [13].



### Question 3:

## 'What if speaking a dialect hinders my child's academic development?'

As parents, one of your major concerns would be your child's academic development. This translates to the dilemma of whether to impart the dialect of a lesser prestige (let's be honest here) to your child while they master the majority official language at the same time. You might worry that speaking a dialect may cause your child to have a weaker proficiency in other standard languages, and as a result at a disadvantage in this increasingly competitive society. However, your child is more capable than what you think! While it is true that English is the main language in Singapore that is used widely in school and serves as the medium for instruction, children's brains have **high plasticity to learn and cope well** with different languages [14].



### Question 3: 'What if speaking a dialect hinders my child's academic development?'

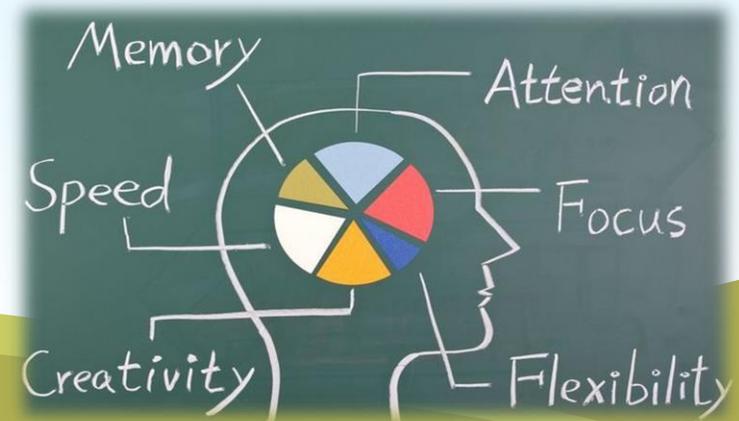


Your child might have a smaller vocabulary bank and slower grammatical development than their monolingual peers when measured separately, but that is all **normal!** This is because their language growth, alike their language input, is being divided between languages [13]. When measured using a combined score, there is in fact, no difference in the total vocabulary (TV) between the two groups [5]. Furthermore, their grammatical development would catch up to their peers quickly by the age of 9 or 10 [15]. Therefore, you do not need to worry that your child will fall behind their counterparts in terms of understanding under normal development.

### Question 3:

## 'What if speaking a dialect hinders my child's academic development?'

On the contrary, language and literacy-related skills that were mastered in their dialects can be **transferred across to benefit in learning another language** [16]. This means that the experience of learning a family's dialect would not impede your child's grasp of English or Mandarin but rather **complement their development** instead. Many studies have also demonstrated that learning multiple languages would improve not only a child's **linguistic abilities**, but also their **cognitive** and **creative abilities** as well [17, 18]. This means to say that learning a dialect would not harm your child's development, but even enhance his/her capacity to excel in other abilities that contribute to their academic development. Therefore, childhood is in fact, the best time for your child to pick up languages and dialects naturally.



## Question 4:

### 'So... How much input should my child be exposed to?'

At the end of the day, it is not about speaking and learning dialect as the only language at home. The most important thing in language acquisition is the **amount of time** and **quality of input** that is allocated to the languages that your child is learning [5, 19]. Remember, balance is key! The amount of time that your child is exposed to his/her dialect and other languages should be comparable, and the number of hours would be a good gauge to how exposed your child is to both (or more) languages in order to acquire balanced language skills [20]. This is also because children younger than 9 or 10 years old are more vulnerable to the attrition of a language if they do not use it on a constant basis [21].



One thing to note is that the **time allocation** for each language can be flexible depending on the importance of each language to you and your child. If your child attends nursery or kindergarten regularly, they would most likely be exposed to the mainstream languages in his/her school for a good number of hours. Thus, as parent, you can find a **balance** in their language use and speak dialect to your child at home. At the same time, you should also be aware of the importance of the standard languages used in Singapore. Thus, do allocate a sufficient and reasonable amount of time for your child to communicate with you in those languages too!

## Question 5:

### 'How can I make dialect learning fun for my child?'

Interactive activities are good ways to attract children to learn a language in a fun way willingly. As a matter of fact, children can learn better when they are having fun in an environment away from stress [22, 23]. This is applicable to all language learning and not just dialects! One good way to promote happy learning with good quality input is through bedtime stories, or reading in general. Many studies have found that language exposure through storybook reading is an excellent input that is **supportive of language development** [5, 24, 25]. This is because there is a **greater variability and diversity of vocabulary present in story books** [26], thus your child can be exposed to a larger range of vocabulary that is helpful for his/her language growth.



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Also, book reading at home between one to three years old are also related to **better reading comprehension** when they are older [27]. As there are very few books with dialect scripts, you can read the stories in your dialect and prompt your child with questions and answers to facilitate an interactive setting. Therefore, aside from spending more quality time with your child and promoting parent-child bonding, bedtime stories before sleep can provide a supportive and comfortable learning environment. A bonus point to note is that your child can learn and remember better information that they have seen and learnt before sleep [28].



## Question 5:

### 'How can I make dialect learning fun for my child?'

Additionally, as parents, you can make an effort to speak to your child and have **more conversations** in your dialect. Studies have shown that parents tend to overestimate how much they talk to their child, as a result also underestimate what they could do to enhance their child's language environment at home [29].

Also, it is important to note that conversations with your child should always be a **two-way street**. Children often display higher comprehension skills than production as it comes later on [30]. It is important for you as parents to take time each day to listen and talk to your child, so that they can have an actual use of the language, while expressing their feelings and thoughts. This would also help them to learn more vocabulary through your input and interaction.

With more frequent learning activities, and parents who exhibit **steadier praise for their effort** (not ability), you can aid in advancing your child's early cognitive growth and language development [31]. So, don't forget to praise your child!



## More Activities!

Aside from the aforementioned, these are some of the other interactive activities that you can conduct with your child on a daily basis for them to learn language and express themselves.

- Read and tell stories or role play using toys or puppets
- Sing rhymes in various languages

**I hope that you will have a great time speaking dialect with your child and pass on the precious language!**



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