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Articles**

BILINGUALISM

by Jo Bertrand

Being the mother of two potentially bilingual children (the youngest is only three months old) and the teacher of French and English bilingual children, the subject of bilingualism is very important to me. In fact we have recently moved to China and are now considering multilingualism. But what are the advantages of learning several languages from an early age? What are the dangers? What's the best way to teach your child two or more languages simultaneously? I don't suggest I have the answers here but like most mothers and teachers I certainly have a point of view!

What is a bilingual child?

The way I see it, being bilingual means being able to communicate almost perfectly in two languages and also knowing something about both cultures. If I take the example of my daughter it's about being able to understand when someone is speaking another language and being able to switch automatically into speaking it with them. At two and a half she has already grasped the concept of 'Daddy speaks French and Mummy speaks English'. She has even picked up that Bai Yuoine speaks Chinese! I think it's very important for her to know that the cartoon character Noddy is also called Oui Oui by her friends at playgroup and that Marmite and Cadburys chocolate exist as well as croissants. This is what makes it possible for her to communicate with the people around her regardless of whether they are French or English.

Why encourage bilingualism?

In our case it is logical that with an English mother and French father our children should be able to speak both languages to communicate, not only with us, but with their grandparents and extended family. On a wider scale, learning two or more languages helps children to accept cultures other than their own. If speaking their mother tongue(s) at home and at school is encouraged they are more likely to enjoy their difference and view difference in general as a positive thing.

How do you raise a bilingual child?

There may be a dominant language and this will normally depend on the country you live in or the language your child uses most at school. However, it will also depend on what language is spoken in the home. We lived in France and spoke French at home but I always speak to my children in English. It's imperative that the child has consistency. They know that their English auntie will always speak to them in English and that for her to understand them they should speak to her in English.

What are the dangers?

It can be very difficult for people around you to support what you do. Grandparents can be upset if they don't understand what you're saying to their grandchild and worry that they will never be able to communicate with them. This is of course highly unlikely and you should stick to your guns.

Another problem we have encountered was when our daughter refused to listen to either of us. A psychologist advised us that as there wasn't a common language at home between the parents and child and so I should stop speaking English and spend the weekend speaking only in French. Thankfully I decided to ignore this piece of advice and persisted with my English!

I also know of one child who had problems at school because his friends made fun of him. His parents eventually gave up speaking English to him. Unfortunately children can be cruel and differences whatever they may be are often a source of bullying. Differences need to be promoted and valued and celebrations such as the International Mother Language Day help to do just that.

International Mother Language Day

21st February 2000 saw the first Mother Language Day celebrated internationally. However the importance of this date originated in Bangladesh where in 1952 a handful of students, now known as language martyrs, were killed in demonstrations defending Bangla, their mother language. In 1999 UNESCO decided to take this cause onto an international scale in order to encourage cultural diversity and worldwide tolerance.

The Themes

Each year the celebration is devoted to a different aspect of language. This has ranged from how children learn their literacy skills at school to how to preserve some of the 6000 languages that exist worldwide. One year was about developing the teaching of mother languages and in 2002 the celebration helped raise awareness of linguistic and cultural traditions around the world. Yet another year the International Mother Language Day was dedicated to Braille and Sign Language, two non-verbal languages that are an invaluable source of communication for many people around the world.

A Multilingual Community

It's essential that we limit alienation throughout the world. By speaking other languages as well as your own, or having two or more mother languages, you can contribute to the creation of a global community. My contribution to this multilingual community is exposing my children to varied cultures and languages, maintaining their mother language, while trying to learn the language of the people around me. Although with my ten or so words of Mandarin I am far from being multilingual!