

## **Becoming bilingual 2: helping young children to learn more than one language**

It can sometimes seem to be a challenge when we work with children who are learning English as an additional language. What should we do? What advice should we give parents? First of all, believe that speaking two languages is a gift. All practitioners can give the gift of English, even if we don't speak another language ourselves. It is our support and encouragement to children and their parents that counts.

Tell parents that you believe that bilingualism is important. Encourage parents to keep using their home language with their children.

- *When parents register their children, find out where the family come from, what languages are spoken at home, and what these languages are called.* For example, an African family may be from Ghana. Their local language may be *Twi*, but as English is taught in most schools in Ghana, English and *Twi* will be spoken at home. Some parents may be reluctant to admit that they use more than one language at home. Reassure them that this is helpful for their child, and that he will learn plenty of English at nursery. However it is important to know that little Kevin can understand two languages, and will learn English quickly in nursery, but may need some support with expressing himself and understanding English.
- *Ask parents to write down and/or tell you some key words and phrases in the home language.* These can be used to understand what the child is saying, and for us to communicate to them in the early days before English is established. It is also great fun to be able to speak children's home language, even if their English is well developed!  
Some children may be very distressed when separating from their parents, and this can be made worse if there is a difficulty in talking in English. A little Polish girl was very unhappy until a practitioner told a story about a dog, and used the Polish word for 'dog' whenever it came up in the story. This made a big impression, and helped build a positive relationship between practitioner and child, (and with the parents when the little girl told them, "My teacher is Polish!")
- *Some parents may be reluctant for their children to be spoken to in their home language by practitioners in the setting.* They may believe that their children will learn English more quickly if only English is spoken. Reassure the parents that children learn quickest if they can have new words and ideas translated into their home language (especially if you have a practitioner fluent in their language.) It also helps children to settle and become confident if they know that the adults who are caring for them know at least a few key words and phrases in their language.
- *Learn songs and rhymes from the child's language.* This can be a very quick way for us to learn new languages. Number rhymes are particularly helpful. One setting translated 'Heads shoulders knees and toes' into several languages.

- *Make sure you pronounce children's names correctly.* This is a very important way of showing respect for the child's family and culture.
- *What if children have speech and language difficulties?* It is still important for the family to speak their mother tongue. A child with communication difficulties needs to be surrounded by people who feel confident in their use of language, so that she has positive role models.
- *Make displays that represent all the languages that are spoken and/or understood in your setting (including by the staff).* One setting asked all the parents to tell them how they can say the word 'baby', and made a display with pictures of babies, and captions in lots of different languages. This proved to be a very big talking point for the children and parents. Some settings do this for Mothers' Day, emphasising the word 'mother'.
- *Invest in or borrow books written in two languages.* These dual-language books are often popular English storybooks with English and another language on the same page, or are traditional tales from other cultures. Visit [www.mantralingua.com](http://www.mantralingua.com) for lots of ideas.
- Invite parents into your setting to tell a story or sing a song in their home language. They may need a bit of support at first, but children love this and find listening to different languages fascinating.
- Find out about popular foods from different countries and cultures. This can be a great way of learning new words and ideas, and building good relationships with families (especially if they teach everyone how to cook delicious dishes!)

### Useful references

- *A Parents' and Teachers' Guide to Bilingualism* by Colin Baker (Multilingual Matters)
- *Home Pages: Literacy Links for Bilingual Children* by Charmian Kenner (Trentham)
- *Becoming Biliterate* by Charmian Kenner (Trentham)
- [www.bilingualism-matters.org.uk](http://www.bilingualism-matters.org.uk)
- [www.mantralingua.com](http://www.mantralingua.com)
- [www.bilingualfamilynewsletter.com](http://www.bilingualfamilynewsletter.com)
- [www.ourlanguages.org.uk](http://www.ourlanguages.org.uk)