

Myths of Multilingual Families

By [Holly Wilhelm](#)

In some families, children become bilingual. When a child interacts with one or more caretakers in a language on a regular basis, he or she learns to use that language. The key to learning languages in the home—whether one, two, or even more—is interaction. Interaction involves speaking and listening. In many intercultural families, however, children do not become bilingual. Simply gaining exposure to a language is not sufficient for a child to learn the language. For example, a child may grow up hearing parents speak a language to each other. However, if they never speak to the child in that language, the child can hear the language for years and never learn a single word. Becoming bilingual requires that children use more than one language, and then continue to use them as they grow older.

Here are a few myths that people believe about children and bilingualism. Families who intend to raise their children to be bilingual will benefit by learning what research shows. Sometimes even very well-meaning friends, relatives, and teachers impart language myths in attempts to help, but in doing so give faulty advice or have concerns that worry caregivers unnecessarily about a child's language development. Here are some common beliefs that research disproves:

1. **Myth:** As long as my child hears us speaking our language, he will learn it.

Truth: Hearing a language will do nothing for the child's speaking skills, and little to help him understand a language if he isn't required to respond by speaking in the language. For a child to be bilingual, he or she needs very frequent practice hearing and speaking a language. If hearing a language were sufficient to learn it, then second generation immigrants in the United States would always remain fluent in the family language. As many immigrant parents know, this simply is not the case.

2. **Myth:** Once my child has learned a language, he or she will never forget it.

Truth: Children often lose languages they do not continue to practice. This happens all the time. To be bilingual for life, be sure your children continue to practice their languages either with you, playmates, other family members, or in close and frequent social circles like church or community groups.

3. **Myth:** My child will always feel proud to know and speak a second language.

Truth: Many adolescents go through a stage when they reject all languages except the mainstream language, or the one spoken by most of their peers. This is painful for families, but it is a normal stage of growth. Families should continue to use the native language with children. There are gentle methods parents have used successfully to keep children speaking the native language should this occur. As an example, a child in the US may tend to temporarily reject his or her native language of Spanish. He might say, "May I go watch a movie with a friend tonight?" The parents can gently refuse to answer until the child repeats the question in Spanish.

4. **Myth:** My child can speak two languages with me. We'll just switch when we want.

Truth: In most cases, children eventually speak one language with each parent and feel uncomfortable deviating from that language but there are exceptions. A child may naturally grow up speaking one language with the mother and a different language with the father. When a parent speaks more than one native language (such as Hindi and a regional dialect in

India), a child can learn both provided he or she gets sufficient interaction in each. Genuine interaction is a more effective way to help children practice a language than randomly switching between languages.

5. **Myth:** Some children are confused by speaking more than one language in the home.

Truth: Children who are exposed to more than one language at home may speak later than monolingual children. They also may mix the languages by inserting a word or grammar construction from one language into a sentence in another language. These are natural stages of bilingualism in children. Around age three or four, most children have sorted the languages and use them on cue with people or in social situations.

6. **Myth:** My child can always learn my native language later. For now, I will help him or her learn the language of the community where we live.

Truth: Children learn the language of the community in school and from friends. They often lose or reject the minority language of their parent. Some parents feel concerned that children will begin kindergarten without sufficient practice in the community language. In this case, families can enroll children in playgroups, attend social functions like church, read stories at home, or play vocabulary games to provide practice. The mode of communication with children should be the community language only if that is the parents' first language. At home, parents should always communicate with children in the language the parents know best; this is critical for a child's cognitive development.

7. **Myth:** My child will learn my language when he's older because he'll visit my country.

Truth: First, if a visit is the bulk of the child's experience in the language, he or she is unlikely to develop fluency in the language, even if the visit is a long one. If language practice continues after a visit of two to three months during which the child is hearing and using the target language each day, then this may help the child to develop fluency.

8. **Myth:** Since my children are learning two languages early on, they will have native accents in each language.

Truth: Children who grow up speaking one language in the home and another in the community tend to have a native sounding accent only in the community language. In the home language, usually children develop an accent.

9. **Myth:** My children will speak our home language together.

Truth: Siblings eventually speak the language together that they use in school. Some families are able to encourage children to speak the home language in some situations, such as at the dinner table together with parents. However, even in this situation, child siblings tend to feel most natural using English (or the language they use in school) with each other.

10. **Myth:** My children will have no problems talking to my family—after all, these are their closest relatives.

Truth: Many children are unable to communicate with their grandparents due to language barriers. Families who strongly feel children should be able to maintain these lines of communication should start early to make sure children are interacting in the family language, not just hearing parents or grandparents speak it.

Like anyone else, children need practice in a language to develop speaking and listening skills, and certainly to develop fluency, in any language. It is possible for children to easily and naturally grow up bilingually when sufficient support and interaction is given in each

language the child uses. Even well-meaning family, friends, and teachers will give families advice, such as practice the community language at home or speak one language on Monday and another on Tuesday. Parents should speak the language they know best with children, and provide social support and other methods of practice for other languages they want children to learn.

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