

Picture the scene. A childminder says goodbye to a four-year-old at the end of the day. "Bye bye" says the boy, before turning to his parent to say "t'as mon dodo?" Effortlessly, the child has spoken two languages virtually in the same breath! Whilst this might seem amazing, it is not unusual. In the UK today many children's home language is not English. So how do they learn more than one language at once, and what can we do to support them?

Language creates identity

A good starting point is to understand the importance for children of having more than one language. Firstly, and most importantly, there is the issue of cultural identity. Being able to communicate with parents and other family members gives a child a sense of belonging.

Secondly, there are also cognitive benefits for multilingual children. Children who can speak more than one language fluently gain additional routes in terms of their thinking, and this can be reflected in IQ scores. This is because language and thought are closely interlinked. Each language gives children a new way of looking at things and an insight into different cultural attitudes. Bilingualism is an excellent resource throughout their lives.

How children learn more than one language

Babies and young children have the capacity to learn several languages, provided they are sufficiently exposed to them. They do this by at first 'tuning in' to the language and the person who is using it, so a language is primarily associated with a person.

Young children will not necessarily be conscious of speaking more than one language. It will just feel natural to use the language that a familiar person uses with them. This is why children are able to talk to a parent in one language and turn to someone else in the room and use another. It is also why a child may ignore a person who tries out their Spanish if normally that person talks in English. The wrong 'code' is being used and so the child will not respond!

Helping children acquire English

Sometimes children have no English, but speak one or even two home languages. Childminders are well placed to support these children, as the homely environment, consistent care and opportunities for one-to-one interaction provide ideal conditions for language learning.

It must be confusing and potentially frightening for a two or three-year-old to be somewhere and not understand what is being said. Children need to feel that they are in a safe place with a safe person. In practical terms, this means that the settling-in period may need to be taken slowly. A puppet or a special toy is helpful here. It can help to build a

bridge, because play does not need a language. A little fun goes a long way to building trust and breaking down barriers.

Create a routine for each visit so that children start to know what to expect. For key terms such as 'toilet', 'food' and 'sleep', you can ask parents to teach you their home words. It might also be worth taking some photographs. Pointing at photos and at the same time giving children the words can be an effective way of helping them to pick up the English terms.

Step by step

Children who already have a home language and then learn English seem to follow a pattern. At first, they may be very quiet. This is normal, as they are tuning in to, and absorbing, the sounds of English. By having a routine and sticking to similar words, children will soon start to pick out regularly occurring words and phrases such as 'bye bye', 'snack', 'shoes on' or 'time for tea'. Look out for signs that they are beginning to understand the English code by, for example, smiling or getting their coat.

During this first phase of language learning, it is important to talk to children and, wherever possible, show them what you are talking about. Point to their 'coat' or take them to the window to show them the 'lorry'. The more they hear, and the more often words are linked to objects or pictures, the quicker they can work out the correlation between the sounds and the meaning.

First words

Once children have worked out some of the meanings of words, it takes a little longer for them to start using them. This again is normal, as there is a gap between being able to understand a language (their receptive vocabulary) and actually using it (expressive vocabulary). Pressuring a child to speak rarely works, but letting the child take their time and building a good relationship does.

Once children have begun to use words, they are usually quick to pick up new ones. First words often have special meaning for the child or are part of their daily routine. Words may also be learnt from being with other children. From this point on, children are usually on their way. Soon they start putting two words together, before going on to use sentences.

Tips

- Find out how language is used in the home, and who by.
- Build a relationship with the child and allow longer for settling in.
- Learn a few key words in the child's home language.
- Use photographs and pictures.
- Establish predictable routines and use the same format of language.
- Let children listen before expecting them to speak.
- Introduce the topic of conversation at the start to ensure that children can follow the meaning. For example: "Ducks. You like ducks don't you?"

- Enrich children's language by using rhymes, songs and pointing out specific features or objects.

Potential problems

Whilst many children pick up more than one language simultaneously, some children experience difficulties. These are usually related to the way that they are hearing languages.

Mixing languages

Some speech delay, mispronunciation and mixing of languages can occur when children are spoken to in more than one language by the same person. Children need adults to be consistent with language, as this allows them to tune in more easily and learn the grammar and structure of a language. If a parent begins a conversation in one language and finishes it in another, the child is not likely to realise that separate languages are being used.

This is especially important in the first three or so years of a child's life. Once children are fluent, language 'hopping' becomes less of an issue. A useful rule to remember is 'one person, one language'. If this is not possible, then language should be linked to situations, for example one language used consistently at bath and bed time.

Lack of exposure

If a bilingual child has insufficient exposure to one of their languages, there is a danger of the other language becoming dominant. The child may lose the ability to think in one of their languages and become frustrated as they cannot say what immediately comes into their minds. Interestingly, whilst at first the focus is often on ensuring that pre-school children gain enough English, later on the situation may need to be reversed, as school-aged children may spend longer using English than their home language. This can lead to them becoming reluctant to use their home language, although they still can understand it.

Practitioners can help children maintain their home language by playing songs, story tapes, nursery rhymes or watching videos in that language. Although this is not ideal as children are not using the language actively, it can be of some assistance.

Feeling embarrassed

It is important that children feel comfortable about speaking their home language. Sometimes older children become self-conscious about using their home language as they don't want to seem different. Valuing a child's ability to speak another language, without it becoming an issue, is important. Avoid situations where children are asked to 'perform' and show others how they can speak another language, unless they are keen to do so.

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