

Raising Multilingual Children

BY PATRICIA KONING

EDITOR'S NOTE: While this article is meant for the readers of The Language Educator—primarily language teachers interested in how language use at home can support language learning in the classroom and vice versa—educators may also wish to share the information here with parents and other family members who would like to know the best methods for raising children to speak multiple languages.

Teachers Pablo and Jackie Muirhead are planning to leave their two children a very special inheritance, but it's not a financial gift. Instead, they are focused on giving their children something even better—bilingualism.

Pablo grew up bilingual; a native of Peru, he spent his childhood summers there after his family moved to the United States. "Spanish was the language in our home, of my family. That had a huge influence on me," he says. "When we had children, we knew we would make Spanish a part of how we raised them."

Jackie grew up monolingual, but began studying Spanish in high school and increased her proficiency in college. For their two children—four-year-old Santiago and two-year-old Gabriela—they are emulating Pablo's childhood.

"We only speak Spanish to our children," he explains. "Our feeling is that they will get enough input in English outside of the home. Our goal, long-term, is that they maintain a high level of Spanish."

Full immersion is one way to raise bilingual children, but it is not an option in families with only one bilingual parent. Sarah Dodson-Knight, a former French teacher in Colorado, speaks French

fluently but her husband does not. However, they are committed to raising their four-year-old son and six-month-old daughter bilingually.

The idea came to them about six years ago when Dodson-Knight was caring for her nephew one day a week. "My sister-in-law and her husband are not bilingual, but they had lived abroad and they appreciated the value of speaking another language," she explains. "They asked me to speak only French to the baby."

What happened astounded her. "By the time he was 18 months old, he was





OPPOSITE PAGE: Pablo and Jackie Muirhead with their children Santiago and Gabriela.

LEFT: Sarah Dodson-Knight reads a book of French rhymes to her son Griffin at age 2.

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speaking two to four-word phrases in French. This was based on a maximum of five hours a week with me," she says. "It blew my mind.

When I saw that, I was sold and my husband was on board too."

As the author of *Get Ahead by Going Abroad: A Woman's Guide to Fast-Track Career Success* and *Go Global! Launching an International Career Here or Abroad*, it may be surprising to learn that Stacie Berdan is monolingual. "Multilingualism and international

experience are no longer nice to have—they're necessities," she says. "If I tried to repeat my career right now I would not be nearly as successful because I only speak English."

Berdan is determined to expose her two daughters to as many languages and cultures as possible to inspire curiosity about the world at large. "Getting them used to hearing foreign languages, to not fear different cultures, that is the first step in setting the stage," she says.

Why Raise a Bilingual Child?

The benefits of speaking two or more languages are clear—multilingualism sharpens cognitive skills, improves employability, provides a better understanding of the world, makes travel more enjoyable, and broadens one's horizons. The earlier one starts learning a language, the more pronounced those benefits become.

A 2002 study by Laura-Ann Petitto, Director of the Cognitive Neuroscience Laboratory for Language and Child Development at Dartmouth College, found that the earlier a child learned a language, the better they learned it and that children also learn better if they picked up the language in their families or communities. [Other research has also backed up the case for beginning language learning early. For an extensive list of studies, go to www.DiscoverLanguages.org and click on "What the Research Shows" and "Information for Parents" under the Resources tab.]

Myths that learning a second language can confuse a child or cause speech delays have been debunked repeatedly. Petitto found that the results of her study "fly in the face of educational policy that says expose a child to only one language at first."

In her 1994 book, *Language Acquisition after Puberty*, Judith R. Strozer reported that the human brain is more open to linguistic development during the years between birth and pre-adolescence and that children who learn a language before the

onset of adolescence are more likely to develop native-like pronunciation.

For the Muirheads, raising their children bilingually is about more than just the language. "We want them to appreciate their cultural heritage and take pride in being bilingual," says Pablo. "Spanish is part of who we are."

Berdan places a high premium on language skills, but she views multilingualism as much more than a tool or line on a résumé. "Someone once said that to speak another language is to have a second soul," she says. "That's how I want my daughters to see it. Language is so much more than an academic exercise."

Getting Started Early

Jackie Muirhead strongly recommends starting at birth. "When I meet a Spanish speaker and we begin our relationship in Spanish, it feels awkward to later communicate in English. It's so hard to switch languages as language is so much a part of identity," she explains. "I didn't want it to feel awkward or contrived to switch over to Spanish with my children so I made a conscientious effort to 'begin our relationship' in Spanish."

Children begin learning the sounds and rhythms of different languages well before they become verbal. A 2009 Italian study reported that being bilingual seems to make the brain more flexible. Researchers tested recognition of three-syllable patterns in 12-month-olds and found that bilingual babies learn two kinds of patterns at the same time while monolingual babies learned only one.

Jacque Bott Van Houten, president of the National Network for Early Language Learning (NNELL), says the ideal time to learn another language is before children enter first grade, from birth to age six.

"During this time of life, language is acquired innately through exposure to language spoken in context in a natural environment. Infants learn by seeing, hearing, and repeated imitation," she explains. "Babies babble, making sounds that are used in many languages, but when they start to talk they mimic only those sounds they hear people around them say, discarding the rest. Those discarded sounds are ones that have no relevance to their speech purpose. This is why we say it becomes more of a learning process to pick up a language later. It is also why learning environments that replicate language-in-context environments, such as immersion programs, are so successful in helping students acquire another language."

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LEFT: At only 5, Stacie Berdan's daughters quickly learned how to scan the Polish menu for their favorite pierogis on their trip to Warsaw, Poland.

RIGHT: Berdan and her family spent a month in Italy in spring 2007. Here they are at the ancient theatre in Taormina, Sicily.

As language educators—they both teach Spanish at Milwaukee Area Technical College—the Muirheads have found it fascinating to watch language acquisition take place before their very eyes. “It is amazing to hear our son throw around the imperfect

subjunctive like few Spanish majors can,” Jackie shares. “That said, he still can’t tie his shoes.”

Of course, parents who are starting later should by no means despair. Research shows that even into adolescence, children still absorb language readily—but being consistent is even more critical in these later years.

In November, Dodson-Knight gave a session entitled “Second Language Learning at Home: Strategies, Challenges, and Resources” at the 2011 ACTFL Convention in Denver. One of the biggest issues that session participants brought up was the challenge of time. “Research says that if you want to become fluent, about one-third of your waking hours need to take place in the target language,” she says. “For working parents, this can be really tough.”

She recommends that parents stick to a routine that works for them. “Find a time in which you always speak that language,” she advises. “Maybe dinner is always in the target language or you speak only the target language in the car. Or you can create a space in the home that you can devote exclusively to the target language—a colorful Bolivian blanket on the floor where people can only speak Spanish, say, or a cushion that only people speaking Arabic can sit on.”

It's No Accident

For the Muirheads, raising their children bilingually should be easy since they both speak Spanish. Since Dodson-Knight knows French, all she has to do is speak it to her daughter. Not true—even for bilingual parents, raising a child bilingually takes a concerted effort.

“Language acquisition does not happen by accident,” says Pablo Muirhead. “We live in an English-rich environment, so we have to ensure our children get the language input they

need at home.” He notes that with the exception of his extended family, his children will experience much of the world outside their home in English.

The myth that children learn languages so easily and naturally that nothing special needs to be done to foster the growth of two languages can set parents up for failure. “When parents believe this way, they may fail to provide the proper bilingual learning circumstances and then be surprised or disappointed when children are not fully bilingual,” says Barbara Zurer Pearson in her chapter, “Bilingual Infants: Mapping the Research Agenda” which appeared in the 2002 book, *Latinos: Remaking America* by Marcelo Suarez-Orozco and Mariela Páez.

Dodson-Knight found that she had to re-learn French in a whole new way to interact with a baby. “I was a great student in French. I lived abroad and taught college-level French for seven years,” she says. “But when it comes to a baby, there is a whole different lexicon. Despite a master’s degree in French, I couldn’t say ‘uh-oh, the baby had a blowout in his onesie and it got onto the bouncy chair.’”

She read French parenting blogs and French child-rearing books to bolster her baby language vocabulary. “At first it felt silly and forced to barrage my infant son with French, especially in public,” she says. “But I didn’t anticipate how speaking French to my children would make me feel like a better parent. Not just because I’m teaching them something valuable—it’s that every interaction is very deliberate and my attention is very focused. While I’ve given up parts of my culture by not interacting with my kids in English, I feel like speaking only in French has helped me forge a stronger connection with them.”

Simply having bilingual parents is not enough; it is important that children hear the target language in many different circumstances and from different speakers. Studies have linked language speed and growth of literacy to the number of conversations and the word variety that a child hears.

Having your child interact with other children in the target language is also crucial. Amanda Seewald founded the MARACAS: Spanish Program for Young Learners to do just that. “Kids really learn best with their peers,” she says. MARACAS began as a grant-funded pilot program developed by Seewald and has found a home both within the local recreation department and as part of the curriculum and extracurricular offerings in several private preschools and elementary schools in New Jersey.



Children play in Spanish in a MARACAS enrichment class. Interacting with peers in the target language, through school, classes, playgroups, and even Skype chats, is an important component of a bilingual childhood.

Parents can also look for a playgroup in the target language or create their own. Dodson-Knight, for example, started a French story time at her public library. Jackie Muirhead has become a minor celebrity among Santiago's friends because she gives a weekly 15-minute Spanish lesson to his pre-kindergarten class. At the end of her first class a girl asked Jackie if she spoke "like Dora" at home as well.

Keeping It Fun

All work and no play is a sure way to drive children away from language learning. Fortunately, making language learning enjoyable is not difficult.

"While formal methods of instruction vary according to the child's age, you don't need to turn your house into a classroom and think of all your interactions as language lessons," says Dodson-Knight. "Just give your child as many possibilities for him or her to hear and interact in the different languages."

Language Systems

One of the most widely used language systems to raise bilingual and multilingual children is **One Person, One Language (OPOL)**. Each adult consistently speaks only one language to the child, like in Sarah Dodson-Knight's home. This method requires language supplement, like playgroups, travel, or caregivers who speak the language, as it is important for the child to hear the language from more than one person. This can also be challenging for parents if one does not speak the target language.

The Muirheads are using the **Minority Language at Home** pattern. Typically, everyone speaks the target, or minority, language at home and the majority language is used elsewhere. In the Muirheads' case, Spanish is the language of their home and with Pablo's relatives. This is considered the most fail-safe method, as children will hear and interact in the language with both parents consistently from birth until they leave home.

The Multilingual Children's Association (MCA) says this method requires strong nerves on the part of the parents, since the child may not catch up with his monolingual peers in the majority language until around five years of age or when they start school. The Muirheads, however, aren't worried about this. "Santiago's English was at age level months after starting preschool because he is surrounded by so much English outside of the home," says Pablo. "Our concern is not with their English but rather in making sure that they always maintain a high level of proficiency in Spanish."

The MCA suggests a few other patterns: one language spoken every day, the other on extended vacations to another country or in a specific location, such as in an immersion program at school. Any pattern that works for a family is good and what feels most natural will work best.

Dodson-Knight has one friend who lives in France and is teaching her children Spanish and English. She switches between English and Spanish every two weeks while her husband speaks only in French. "It comes down to consistency," she says. "Whatever method you can stick to day in and day out is best."



She recommends rich and varied input: books, music, toys, videos, and computer games. Interactions in the target language should be fun, she advises. Don't give your eight-year-old flashcards to memorize or criticize your toddler's pronunciation. Rather, play games like Simon Says, Bingo, and Memory.

Dodson-Knight suggests taking tours of the house, identifying objects and rooms and colors or doing art projects that require the kids to follow directions. Sing songs, recite nursery rhymes and fingerplays (with gestures to reinforce meaning), and act things out together. "You can make patently false statements that your child will gleefully correct, like 'we're going to eat pizza with rocks on it in the bathtub for dinner,'" she says.

Seewald was surprised by how well music helped her younger students. "I knew, of course, that music doesn't just entertain, that it helps with language acquisition," she says. "But when I began sending music CDs home for parents to play during the week, the difference was amazing."

While the YouTube video website (www.youtube.com) was created primarily for entertainment and social purposes, it is a rich educational resource as well. Dodson-Knight looks for clips of children singing and playing in French—those cute videos that parents post to show their friends and family—and shares them with her children. "Seeing another child having fun in the target language is very motivational," she says.

In the Muirhead house, Spanish-language television is the rule. "We have a Latino package from our cable pro-

vider," says Pablo. He concedes that "it is easier to find this for Spanish than many other languages."

Books, of course, are crucial to language acquisition in any language. They also help children see language as a living, breathing thing, says Seewald, and not just something that mommy and daddy say.

"We have had to buy additional bookshelves to house the growing number of Spanish-language books that our kids have," says Jackie Muirhead. "We find this a great way to extend the variety of topics that our kids can talk about."

Finding Immersion

Immersion is one of the fastest and most effective ways to learn a language. If you cannot provide a complete immersion environment at home, look for ways to give your children those opportunities elsewhere.

Last summer, Berdan and her family spent four weeks in Central America, traveling through Nicaragua, Panama, and Costa Rica. By the end of the trip, she says, her daughters were picking up on the different accents and phrases of each country. "Four weeks abroad seems extravagant, but it probably cost us less than a week at Disney World," she says.

There are plenty of summer immersion camps, ranging from Concordia Language Villages in Minnesota to programs offered through local school districts—and these can be a particularly good way to find immersion in a less commonly taught language. Berdan's daughters attended a STARTALK Chinese immersion summer program

Resources

Better Chinese

www.betterchinese.com

Bilingual/Bicultural Family Network

www.biculturalfamily.org

Bringing up Baby Bilingual

(Sarah Dodson-Knight's Blog)
babybilingual.blogspot.com

Center for Applied Linguistics

www.cal.org

Foreign Language Fun

foreignlanguagefun.com

Hello World

www.hello-world.com

MARACAS

www.maracas123.com

Multilingual Children's Association

www.multilingualchildren.org

Multilingual Living

www.multilingualliving.com

Multilingual Matters

www.multilingual-matters.com

National Network for Early Language Learning

www.nnell.org

PBS Noah Comprendo

pbskids.org/noah/games.html

Raising Bilingual Children

www.raising-bilingual-children.com

Spanglish Baby: Raising Bilingual Kids

www.spanglishbaby.com

Stacie Berdan

stacieberdan.com

offered through their school district. Many heritage schools offer weekend classes.

Seek out friends and family who speak the target language, or hire someone who does. Have a high school or college student babysit in the target language (and be sure to pay them a little extra for the service!).

Language Rebellion

The “tween” and teen years are a challenge for any parent. In bilingual families, it is a common phenomenon that older adolescents will resist speaking a second language. One way to combat this is to make sure children understand your motivations.

“Instead of lecturing, try to get the kids to generate reasons why it’s a good idea to know more than one language,” says Dodson-Knight. “Can they think of people they know, celebrities they admire, who are bilingual? Why is it cool to be able to speak another language?”

Societal pressures can come into play. Pablo Muirhead remembers a time in fourth grade when he wanted to go by the name Paul at school and did not want to speak Spanish in public due to teasing.

“To combat societal ignorance, such as anti-immigrant sentiments, we need to be proactive in instilling pride in being bilingual,” he says. “Kids are quick to pick up values attached to language and recognize which language is of higher value. We want our children to take pride in their ability to speak Spanish.”

He recommends that parents communicate with their children’s teachers. “Teachers should know not just that a child lives in a bilingual household, but that it’s something your family prizes,” he explains. “Teachers can help reinforce that pride.”

Above all, don’t quit. “We’ve seen too many parents give up when their children are nine or 10 years old,” says Pablo. “When the kids begin to resist, it’s more important than ever to remain consistent.”

He and Jackie expect that one day their children might not want to speak Spanish. “We’ll keep responding in Spanish,” he says. “Even if they take a hiatus from speaking Spanish, they still need that consistent input.”

Parents should keep their expectations high, but also realistic. One parent in Spain, raising his son to speak both English and Spanish, commented on Dodson-Knight’s blog that deciding to raise a child bilingually adds another layer of uncertainty to parenting.

“Maybe the smart thing to do is set realistic goals,” he writes. “[My son] doesn’t need to be Shakespeare and it’s not your challenge, and it’s not about showing everyone how smart your kid is because he speaks English. It’s just about giving tools to your kid so he can survive in the jungle.”

Patricia Koning is a freelance writer and regular contributor to The Language Educator based in Livermore, California.

Teaching What You Can’t Speak?

Can you teach your child a language you don’t know? The answer is a qualified yes—it is possible, but takes significant commitment. According to Jacque Bott Van Houten, the best influence a parent can provide is to model an attitude of appreciation of difference in general, and language and culture in particular.

Stacie Berdan’s primary goal isn’t for her daughters to achieve fluency in a single language at an early age, although she would like them to eventually become multilingual. “It’s more about setting the stage for them to enjoy traveling and learning about other cultures and want to know more of the world,” she says. “Language is a critical skill for the 21st century; it’s what inspires me professionally and personally.”

Van Houten suggests that parents who are not bilingual should routinely use the language in chunks or phrases in meaningful contexts, like saying good morning or night or wishing happy birthday. Parents should also take advantage of opportunities to sing, play games, and read to their children in the target language.

You can also learn along with your children. As Dodson-Knight learned, the language of infants is a world removed from adult conversation. The Multilingual Children’s Association (MCA) suggests studying on your own or taking a class during this time. It is also important to find native speakers to supplement your efforts.

And as for making mistakes—the MCA says not to worry. According to the organization’s website, native speakers make mistakes too. Your errors will be “overruled” by the amount of exposure your child gets to the language. The same is true for pronunciation: How many different accents exist even within one single language?

According to the MCA, one day your child might start correcting you. Then, they say, you can relax.

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