

# Encouraging bilingualism



Foundation Degree student **Sonia Winter** describes the part of her degree work that focused on bilingualism in nurseries.

In the second year of my foundation degree studies at Montessori Centre International, we were given the assignment of producing an informative leaflet for a fictional nursery. The purpose of the leaflet was to inform parents of the nursery's policy for emergent bilinguals at the setting, and to demonstrate the importance of partnerships between all those helping to support the child's first and subsequent language acquisition.

'follow the child' with a multilingual background, we must, as practitioners, find effective ways to articulate the subject to parents, families and communities. Simple, clear and informative leaflets are one such way to achieve this.

In producing my leaflet, I took inspiration from the renowned Chelsea Open Air nursery, which does a lot of



language has been partially established (successive bilingualism). A child's personality traits and motivation levels are an important variable in the second language acquisition process.

There is no evidence that learning more than one language will delay the development of speech and language skills.

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I was delighted that we were doing something on bilingualism. In London, where I am based, the broad diversity of cultures that are present means that many nurseries are predominantly bilingual environments. The benefits of bilingualism are often overlooked, and common misconceptions prevail in settings about how to best support bilingual children. Therefore, to truly

good work producing informative material of this nature for parents and practitioners, covering various topics such as schemas or play. I hoped to strike a similar balance between an attractive, engaging format, and clear, concise and relevant content.

**The following is the content of the leaflet:**

## Being Bilingual

To understand and make oneself understood in two or more languages - bilingualism - is normal for most people in the world. Figures suggest that 70% of the world's population uses more than one language. This ability to switch between languages enriches our social and cultural life and breaks down barriers and it should be a cause for celebration.

A language learned by young bilingual children before the age of three is generally described as the 'first' language.

Languages learned after that are usually known as second or additional languages. Some children will be learning two or more languages from birth (simultaneous bilingualism), whilst other children will begin to learn a second language after the first

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## Involving & Supporting Parents

- We ensure that all written materials for parents are in the home languages and English, and we have a language poster where parents can add phrases they want us to know.
- We ask parents to help us by teaching





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us at least 10 words and phrases in their home language, as well as recording a few songs, rhymes and stories.

- We provide parents with a short video that explains the basic daily routines of the nursery in various languages.
- Parents are supplied with dual language strips, each containing essential phrases to facilitate communication with Key Teachers. i.e. "I may be late tomorrow because..."



### Common Questions & Misconceptions

**My child often misses words and phrases from English and Spanish in the same sentence. Is that normal?**

Yes, most bilingual children can easily switch between languages and language mixing is normal. Children who mix are not confused, they are just using words they know in different languages.

**My birth language is Arabic but should I speak English with my child at home?**

Research has shown that if children know their first language well this will help them to learn English. It is very important that you speak, read and sing to your child in the language that you know best and feel most comfortable in.

**My child does not talk at all when at the nursery. Should I be concerned?**

Young bilinguals may go through a silent period before feeling confident to use English whilst they 'tune in' to the sounds of the new language. This can last from a few weeks to a few months and should not cause concern.

**Should my child be equally fluent in my birth language and English?**

You should not expect your child to be equally fluent in both languages. Bilinguals tend to use their languages for different purposes. For example, a Greek-English bilingual may know more school related words in English than Greek.

### Supporting Bilingual Children

To support and promote bilingualism...

- Our nursery uses the one language-one speaker model' (bilingual staff encourage the children to speak to them in their language rather than English).
- Children are encouraged to interact in their home language with their friends and we often organise play dates between children that share the same language.
- All members of our team provide a good and consistent model for our children with an enormous amount of imitation and repetition to develop language and build vocabulary in context. They are skilled in using signs and gestures to communicate and have learned basic social phrases and key words in the different languages of our class (greetings, requests, toileting and snack time).
- On the nursery walls we display posters and signs in English and other languages. We use symbols, simple Makaton, photographs and

other visual prompts displayed at children's level to identify nursery rules, routines and interesting facts.

- Each child has a Key Teacher who links the nursery and the home environment and knows in detail the child's ability in their home language and in English. This allows for better, individual planning; for example, a Key Teacher might help a child to make relationships with other children from whom they can learn English. At present we have two bilingual support workers who each visit the nursery twice a week and work in partnership with Key Teachers to better provide for bilingual children's needs.

### Further reading

#### Websites

ICAN Children Communication Charity: [www.ican.org.uk](http://www.ican.org.uk)

Advice and information on child bilingualism: [www.bilingualism-matters.org.uk/](http://www.bilingualism-matters.org.uk/)

'Talk to Your Baby' - advice and information: [www.literacvtrust.org.uk/talktoyourbabv](http://www.literacvtrust.org.uk/talktoyourbabv)

Supporting bilingual children in the early years: [www.naldic.org.uk/](http://www.naldic.org.uk/)

Information on children's communication [www.talkingpoint.org.uk](http://www.talkingpoint.org.uk)

#### Books

*Supporting Identity, Diversity and Language in the Early Years* Iram Siraj-Blatchford & Priscilla Clarke (2000)

*Listen to Your Child: A Parent's Guide to Language* David Crystal (1986)

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