



Primary Language Literacy Project Frequently Asked Questions

First Words Preschool Speech and Language Program of Ottawa

Does research support the use of first language at home?

Many studies support the use of first language at home. Research shows that encouraging first language use at home promotes the development of strong language skills in the first language. When a child has a good understanding of his/her first language, these strong language skills help him/her to learn a second language. Studies have also shown that children with strong language skills do better in school.

My child speaks our first language well and is starting Kindergarten in English. Should I start speaking to him in English at home?

Parents should continue to speak to their child in their first language at home. This will help their child to learn English at school and to keep his first language too. (1;2)

How should we talk to our child? Should we use one language or two languages?

Parents should communicate with their child in a way that feels natural to them. They should talk with their child in a language that they can use over a long period of time. Children learn language best from people who are fluent in that language and who speak the language well. This might mean speaking a first language at home because it is spoken best. (6)

If both languages are spoken equally well at home here are some tips to promote bilingualism:

- One parent speaks one language; the other parent speaks the other language.
- One language is spoken at home; the other is spoken during the day at school or daycare.
- Both parents speak one language during the day; both parents speak the other language at dinner and in the evening.

It is important for parents to keep the languages separate when speaking and not to mix the two mid-sentence or mid-paragraph. (4;5)

ALL CHILDREN HAVE A FIRST LANGUAGE

THE LANGUAGE THAT THE CHILD LEARNS BEFORE THE AGE OF 3 IS CONSIDERED THE CHILD'S FIRST LANGUAGE.

A LANGUAGE LEARNED AFTER 3 IS CONSIDERED A SECOND LANGUAGE.

My child has an identified speech delay. We speak two languages at home. Will this make the delay worse?

“So far, there is no conclusive evidence that children with language delays will be further delayed as a result of exposure to two languages. Therefore, we should support parents who choose to raise their child with the richness of two languages and cultures. Parents can follow the same tips outlined for promoting bilingualism at home”. (5)

We have been speaking our first language at home since our child was born. Our child is now 3 and just started daycare in English. Should we be concerned that he is not saying much?

Many children who are learning a second language are thought to be language-delayed when they are not. If your child is learning a second language, you can expect the following:

- A silent period of up to 7 months - children need time to understand the new language before using it.
- A mixing of the two languages - children often use words from both languages in one sentence to help fill in words they don't know.
- Grammatical errors - children will make mistakes in the new language until they figure out all the rules.
- A loss of the first language - if children don't keep speaking the first language at home while learning the second one, they will lose skills in the first language. (7)

I have been speaking English to my child since birth. I would like him to learn my first language, but he is already 4 years old. If I start using my first language now, will he be bilingual?

If parents have been talking to their child in another language since birth, it may be hard for everyone to suddenly switch to the parents' first language. The relationship between parent and child may suffer from a sudden change to the use of the parents' first language that the child does not understand. However, parents can still introduce their first language using a consistent pattern such as "one time of the day - one language". For example, a parent may speak his/her first language during suppertime or bathtime. During this routine, the parent would use gestures, objects and contextual cues to help the child's understanding and use of words. In this situation, the child may develop an understanding of the language, but may not be able to speak it fluently.

We speak two languages to our child at home. My husband speaks one and I speak the other. My child is 2 1/2 years old and can only say a few words. Should we be concerned?

Children who are learning more than one language at the same time may say their first words slightly later than children who are only learning one. However, they should speak their first words within the expected age range of 8 to 15 months. By 2 years of age, children should speak about 50 words and be combining 2 words into sentences. Parents who are concerned about their child's speech and language development, can call Ottawa Public Health at 580-6744 for assistance.

References:

1. Thomas and Collier, 1997. *School Effectiveness for Language Minority Students*.
2. V. Collier, 1995. *Acquiring a Second Language for School*.
3. J. Cummins, 1985. *Heritage Language Bulletin*.
4. C. Watson and J. Cummins, 1999. *Some things to know about children acquiring two languages*.
5. C. Watson, 1995. *One language or two? Helping families from other cultures decide how to talk to their language-delayed child*.
6. Lewitt and Baker, 1994. *When your student's parents speak Portugese or any other language*.
7. *Learning Language and Loving it* – Hanen Center.