

## Bilingual Children

Are you raising your child bilingually, or planning to do so in the future, but are unsure how to proceed? Using a question-and-answer format, this practical and reassuring guide will enable you to make informed decisions about how to raise your child with two or more languages. To grow up bilingually is a necessity or an opportunity for more children today than ever before. However, parents are frequently uncertain about what to do, or even fear that they may be putting their child's development at risk. Disentangling fact from myth, it shows that a child can acquire more than one 'first' language simultaneously and that one language need not have negative effects on the other. Each chapter is devoted to a question typically asked by parents in counselling sessions, followed by a concise answer, summaries of the evidence and practical tips.

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A Guide for Parents

JÜRGEN M. MEISEL  
University of Hamburg and University of Calgary



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**For Susanne, of course.**

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## Preface

Raising children bilingually still leads to controversial and emotionally loaded debates, among parents, other family members, or educators who care for children growing up with two or more languages. Remarkably enough, it also arouses the interest of many not directly concerned, and all those expressing their opinions on this issue tend to be strongly committed to their respective points of view. This is perhaps not all that surprising, after all, because it is an issue that concerns the well-being of young children. Since the viewpoints expressed in family conversations, in the popular media and even in research reports defend diverging, and sometimes mutually exclusive, views on bilingualism in early childhood, there is obviously a need for information and clarification. My goal is to respond to this need, offering information that can resolve controversies and inform parents about the possibilities and limits of child bilingualism.

A rapidly increasing number of parents raise their children bilingually or trilingually, either because they view multilingualism as an advantage for children or because they find themselves in a situation where exposure to more than one language is inevitable. To the extent that they have a choice in this matter, they need to know whether exposing young children to two or more languages simultaneously entails risks for children's linguistic or cognitive development. Once they have decided in favour of bilingualism, the challenge is to create an environment that is most beneficial for bilingual development. In this situation, one can turn to friends for advice or search the internet for relevant information. In fact, I know from many years of counselling that parents are usually well informed about the pros and cons of child bilingualism. The reason why they seek counselling is that they are not 100 per cent sure. Doubts remain about the trustworthiness

of their sources of information, especially if these do not agree on what they advise. Some parents fear that warnings against possible risks for children's linguistic and cognitive development might not be unfounded after all, if simultaneous exposure to two languages happens in early childhood. More frequently, however, requests for counselling ask for information about how to support children's bilingualism, or they ask whether the current settings in the family and in the wider social context are indeed favourable for their children's bilingual development. I have learned this in the course of my counselling activities. Interacting with parents and educators, I have gained a better idea of which concerns are most relevant for them, and I hope to have succeeded in addressing them all in this book.

In fact, most of the questions concerning alleged risks or benefits of child bilingualism can be answered today with much confidence, based on results of research by linguists and psychologists. Systematic studies began almost exactly 100 years ago, and research activities increased dramatically as of the 1980s. I believe that parents and other caregivers should be informed about the many findings obtained by this research, and this is what I am trying to achieve with this book.

The choice of topics addressed here and the thematic focus on language development during the first five to six years is largely determined by the questions raised in face-to-face counselling sessions, in emails addressed to the counselling service I have offered for 35 years, or in private conversations. However, it is also influenced by research findings. Sometimes, research studies address issues and obtain results that are relevant for those looking after children growing up bilingually, even if parents have not asked about them. In other words, in some cases I offer answers to questions you did not know you wanted to ask.

The kind of questions to which you, the readers, want to find answers will depend on, among other things, the type of linguistic knowledge and skills you would like your children to attain. Should they become native speakers in more than one language or merely develop basic communicative skills in one of the languages,

or do you want your children to reach an intermediate proficiency level? The kind of support children need depends crucially on how one answers these questions. Yet although I have tried to indicate alternative solutions that exist in different settings, it is unfortunately not always possible to deal with them in much detail. I have therefore opted for an approach that starts from the assumption that children exposed to two or more languages from birth are expected to acquire competences equivalent to those of monolingual native speakers of these languages. This does not mean that I am propagating linguistic perfectionism. Rather, it is an attempt to determine what can be achieved in principle and to ask subsequently what other alternatives exist if this goal is either not attainable or not the one set by parents.

To be quite explicit: my intention is not to coax parents into raising children bilingually but to help them make informed decisions when setting goals for their linguistic education. If they do want to raise them bilingually, I offer advice on how to reach this goal, focusing on the linguistic development during preschool years.

Ideally, the information on child bilingualism presented in this book should be sufficiently detailed to allow readers to find answers to questions arising in the specific settings of their families. They obviously do not want to be bored by expositions containing only well-known information. On the other hand, they probably do not want to become immersed in details of linguistic or psycholinguistic research. Still, one can ask if some such details would be of interest after all, if they can be argued to shed light on the questions to which readers want to find answers. I may be wrong, but based on my counselling experience, I am convinced that the readers of this book expect to be offered more detailed information and less superficial treatments of the issues at stake than what they can find searching the internet, in blogs or on Wikipedia. Quite obviously, I am merely guessing what the main interests of the readership may be. But although you, the readers, do not constitute a homogenous group with respect to your interests and needs, there is one thing you do have in common: you read

books. And you are willing to expose yourself to a book-length discussion of child bilingualism.

Nevertheless, in an attempt to accommodate different needs and allow for flexibility when reading the book, the chapters are all organized in an identical fashion. The first section presents the problems to be dealt with in the chapter and, whenever possible, questions are answered in this section in a concise fashion. The second section then summarizes some research results on which these answers are based. These research reports are presented in an as non-technical fashion as possible. Accordingly, readers who are primarily looking for practical guidelines can skip the second section of every chapter. The third section formulates guidelines that follow from the recommendations given in the first section. Although no additional reading is required in order to be able to follow the discussion presented in the book, section 4 offers reading suggestions for those who want to get some first-hand experience with the research on which the recommendations are based. Moreover, Chapters 3 to 8 need not be read in this order; rather, each of these chapters can be read independently. Note that Chapter 1, section 1.3 contains some more remarks on how to use the book.

In case you are wondering what qualifies me to write a guide for parents of children growing up bilingually, I have to admit that I myself did not grow up bilingually, at least not in the common sense of the term. I grew up in Germany as a dialect speaker, and I learned Standard German later in school. At the age of 10, I started learning my first ‘real’ second language, and a few others, later on. As a linguist studying Romance languages, I have been working on language acquisition since 1973. Over the years, I directed a number of research projects investigating various acquisition types, first adult and child second language acquisition by immigrant workers, and as of 1980 the simultaneous acquisition of languages by children exposed to two languages from birth, French – German, Spanish – Basque, and Portuguese – German. This is why examples from these languages are cited throughout

the book; they are taken from the data collected by these research projects.

I have been engaged in various counselling activities since 1982, initially answering letters by concerned parents of bilingual children, addressed to the editors of the German magazine *Eltern* ('Parents'). Later on, I gave numerous talks addressing non-academic audiences in Germany, France, Spain, Canada, the US, and Brazil. In the late 1980s, I set up a counselling service at the University of Hamburg, initially as a telephone hotline and as of 1999 on the university website. A similar service continues to be offered at the University of Calgary and can be found at the following address: <http://arts.ucalgary.ca/pcs>. These exchanges with parents are the main motivation for this book.

This brings me to the last point of this preface. I cannot end it without mentioning at least some of the people who encouraged and supported me when writing this book. First of all, the friends and colleagues who discussed with me the issues dealt with here and who advised me on how to present them, having read parts of the text or the entire manuscript, most importantly Susanne E. Carroll (University of Calgary) and Regina Mahlmann (University of Hamburg). I also want to thank Andrew Winnard (Cambridge University Press) who encouraged me in my plan to write a guide for parents raising children bilingually. Finally, I am grateful to both the past and the current director of the Language Research Centre (LRC, University of Calgary) for allowing me to use the logo from the LRC's Parent Counselling Service, 'Sometimes, two is better than one.'

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## Abbreviations

*	Signals that a construction is not grammatical
2L1	Bilingual first language (acquisition)
2P2L	Both parents speak both languages
AOA	Age of onset of acquisition
cL2	Child second language (acquisition)
CP(H)	Critical period (hypothesis)
CV	Consonant–vowel
fem	Feminine
fMRI	Functional magnetic resonance imaging
L1	Monolingual first language (acquisition)
L2	Second language (acquisition)
LAD	Language Acquisition Device
LMC	Language Making Capacity
masc	Masculine
ML	Majority language
mL	Minority language
mL@H	Minority language at home
ML/2L	Majority language spoken by one parent, two languages by the other one
mL/2L	Minority language spoken by one parent, two languages by the other one
MLU	Mean length of utterances
OPOL	One person, one language
OV	Object–verb
PLD	Primary linguistic data
SLI	Specific Language Impairment
SOV, SVO	Subject–object–verb, subject–verb–object
SV	Subject–verb
UG	Universal grammar
V2	Verb-second order

*V3	Ungrammatical verb-third order
VO, VOS	Verb-object, verb-object-subject
VS	Verb-subject
XSV	Variable element-subject-verb
WL	Weak(er) language