

Helping Your Child Learn in Two Languages



Many families new to the United States face an important choice. Should their children focus on learning only English? Or should the children also be fluent in their home language? Children who know more than one language often benefit in school and later in life. Also, many parents and grandparents find that talking to older children about important life matters is easier if the children retain their home language skills. Here are some ways that parents have helped young children keep their home language while learning English in school.



Be aware of skills and habits of mind that are important in any language.

- Keep in mind that your preschooler can build good speaking and listening skills and habits when he listens and talks to people who are fluent in any language. In school, he will learn from teachers and peers who know English well. At home, you are the language expert!
- Talk with your child in your home language every day so she sees you using words and gestures with ease. Express feelings and complex ideas. Tell jokes and funny stories. Let your child see you reading, making lists, and writing notes so she learns how people communicate through print.
- Help your preschooler count, estimate, compare, measure, and solve problems in your home language so he understands that math concepts are the same in any language.
- Nurture your child's curiosity about the world around her. Use your home language to help her ask questions, describe things she observes, and make predictions. Being able to do those things will help her in school.



Make your home language the foundation for literacy.

- Help your preschooler learn the alphabet and read signs in your home language. That way, he can begin to understand that letters and symbols have meaning.
- Tell stories or read aloud to your child in your home language. Record yourself reading aloud, so your child can listen independently.
- Teach your child songs and musical games in your home language.
- Make books with your child. Your child can dictate stories to you. You might also create fantasy tales or books of true-life family stories. Try making a bilingual dictionary together. Illustrate the books with drawings or magazine cutouts.



Stay in touch with preschool staff.

- Let your preschooler's teachers know that you support your child's education at home by reading, writing, and talking with her in the language you know best.
- If you have time, offer to help out in your child's classroom. You might even try teaching the other children some words and phrases in your home language.



Keep in mind that having a bilingual family is not always easy!

- Look for support groups for bilingual families in your area. Arrange playgroups or outings with other families who speak your home language.
- Help your child to understand that knowing two languages well will be useful to him, even if he now feels some peer pressure to speak only English.
- Treat language learning as a puzzle your family is working on together.



For related Web resources, see "Helping Your Child Learn in Two Languages" at <http://illinoisearlylearning.org/tips.htm>.

Any opinions, findings, conclusions, or recommendations expressed in this tip sheet are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Illinois State Board of Education.



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