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WEEK OF DECEMBER 18

Bilingual Baby

An article from Today'sParent.com
Rating: ★★★★★

Christine Fischer Guy

It's a regular Saturday afternoon, and Anahita Martyn is upstairs with her mother in their Toronto home. Occupied with a weekend chore, Marjan Nezarati sends her daughter downstairs to ask her husband a question and return with his answer. Anahita toddles off, happy to be on such a big-kid errand, and soon Marjan has her husband's answer.

This exchange might be ordinary were it not for the two sets of translations that two-year-old Anahita performs during her fact-finding mission, first from Farsi to English for her father and then from English to Farsi for her mother. Although English is now her dominant language, Marjan speaks to her daughter in Farsi. "I wanted my kids to have a tie to the Iranian side of their heritage," says the Iranian-born geneticist. "I wanted them to be able to speak to my parents and extended family in their mother tongue." Because Marjan's husband speaks only English, Anahita has also begun translating her own utterances for him when he's within earshot. "When she talks to me in Farsi, she'll turn around to Greg and say, in English, I said such-and-such," says Marjan.

In a North American context, Anahita's skill with languages seems extraordinary and, in a North American context, it is. And yet, from a global perspective, a single-language upbringing may actually be the more unusual one. "Statistics from the United Nations suggest that more than half the world's population grows up bilingual," says Janet Werker, a psychologist at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver, whose work focuses on language acquisition in bilingual babies. Economic necessity makes knowledge of more than one language a basic survival skill in many parts of the world; she calls acquiring two languages at once "a very natural thing to do."

Werker's assertion also goes a long way to allaying parental fears about confusing their children with more than one language at a time. The research suggests that it can't be done; at birth, babies can hear all sounds in all languages. Somewhere between eight and 12 months, however, a baby's ability to hear all sounds diminishes as he becomes attuned to the sounds of the language he hears spoken. Japanese babies, for example, can discriminate between L and R, consonants that are commonly confused by Japanese-speaking adults. But by the time that baby reaches 12 months, he has lost that ability because he doesn't need those sounds to speak Japanese.

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A baby being raised in a bilingual household uses language rhythms to tell the two apart, says Linda Polka, a professor in the school of communication sciences at McGill University in Montreal. "They have to sort out the two languages, but they can do it," she says. Newborn babies, for example, can tell the difference between languages if they're rhythmically different. (French and Spanish are rhythmically similar; French and English are rhythmically different.) By the time they reach four months, babies can even hear differences between languages in the same rhythmic class as their own.

Once babies start speaking, there's further evidence that they're keeping the two languages straight: Researchers have found that bilingual children often have translation equivalents in their vocabulary, such as house and *maison*, even among their first 50 words. Children learning a single language, however, resist learning synonyms until they are well past the 50-word stage. "That's taken as evidence by a lot of experts that they're not confusing their languages," says Werker.

Solène Watson, three, who speaks both French and English, clearly understands the difference between the two languages she's learning. She demonstrates this understanding in a little game she plays with her father, Bill, who is the English part of the Watson family equation. "We were collecting leaves on Sunday and she told me, 'This is a leaf. In French we call it a *feuille*,'" says Bill, a Canadian raising his family in London, England, with his French wife, Marie Jo. "She feels she is educating me, which I think she finds fun."

When children, learning two languages at the same time, mix them in the same sentence, as bilingual learners sometimes do, parents worry that it's a sign of confusion. But Fred Genesee says it's quite the opposite. "Say the mother is French-speaking and the kids are stronger in French than in English. When they have to use English, they will often take words from French and use them because they may not know the words in English," explains the McGill professor and leading bilingualism researcher. "So the code mixing isn't a sign of their incompetence; it's actually a sign that they're using all of the resources they have to make themselves understood." Genesee says that mixing languages in the same sentence is also common among adult bilinguals. "When kids code-mix, they're doing something that goes on in the family all the time."

Delay in speaking is another worry for parents considering the bilingual road. Kelly Mendez says that she was counselled to expect her daughter, Claudia, who has heard both Portuguese and English from birth, to start talking a bit later than her peers. But Mendez says that just didn't happen. At 22 months, Claudia speaks and understands both languages well. "When I compare her to some of the kids who are a bit older than her, she speaks two languages and talks a lot more than they do," says Mendez, an Orleans, Ont., mother. Her husband, Filipe, speaks Portuguese to their daughter so that she can connect with her grandparents and extended family, none of whom speak English. "We're really proud of her."

Compared with her big brother, Anahita has a stronger command of Farsi, says Marjan, and she credits the wider Iranian community that Anahita was born into. When Kian was born, the family lived in Calgary and Marjan was the only source of Farsi for her son. Anahita was born in Toronto, home to Marjan's parents and other members of her community, so she has greater exposure to the language and more opportunities to practise.

Marjan's observations about her children's skill with Farsi underline one of the main pieces of advice that researchers offer to parents considering a bilingual household: Make the language input as rich as you can, which means going beyond what comes naturally.

"Language learning is easy for kids, but it's not automatic," says Genesee. "They do need fairly consistent, rich, and regular exposure." That means parents need to foster opportunities for children to hear and practise the language of less exposure. Visits with grandparents or other members of the language community, language-based playgroups, and videos and tapes are all good ways to create rich

learning opportunities.

Genesee also recommends the “one parent, one language” rule, if only because it ensures close to equal play for both languages in an easy-to-maintain way. “The real challenge in raising a child bilingually is not the child’s competence, but the ability of the parents to manage the two languages.” He also recommends that parents plug into a community of other bilingual families (see Resources) so that they don’t get discouraged when their children’s language development differs in comparison with their monolingual peers.

Staying committed, he says, is vital. “Parents have to really believe that what they’re doing is entirely natural and normal for the children, that they’re really not putting a burden on them,” he says. “They have to believe that this is not only possible but also very desirable.”

That’s what Bill and Marie Jo believe. Whatever small difficulties they have along the way, they’re committed to bilingualism for their children. Marie Jo sees language as a link with the family’s past. “We wanted them to be able to speak in both languages to their respective grandparents, to carry their heritages,” she says. Bill sees it as an important part of their future too. “Although English is becoming a dominant language globally, having that mother tongue advantage is an important factor for later in life,” he says. “It’s a gift that we have the power to give them.”

Down the Road: Bilingual Big Kids

While Solène Watson didn’t necessarily speak later than her peers, her mother notices that aspects of her French lag in comparison to children from French families she knows, as does big sister Alicia’s. “Their vocabulary is not as extensive as some of their school friends’,” says Marie Jo. (The Watson family has an English nanny and sends the girls to a French school.) “Their French grammar is also not what it should be and they do use some sentence structure that is English, such as *un vert arbre* rather than *un arbre vert*.” Still, she’s confident in the girls’ ability to learn to speak both languages fully and properly.

Parents raising bilingual children also say they think it’s natural for one of the languages to become dominant. Marjan Nezarati says that when her son, Kian (seven), entered school, English became the dominant language between them. “His English became so much better than his Farsi in terms of being able to express himself,” she remembers. Now she allows his needs to dictate the language of conversation. “If we can talk to each other, a complete conversation, in Farsi, that’s great. But if he needs to get back to English and he’s more comfortable hearing it in English, that’s OK too.” Kian attends Farsi tutoring 1½ hours per week; Marjan is pleased with his progress and the fact that his Farsi is still developing.

Resources

The Bilingual Family Newsletter is a good resource for families raising bilingual children. Visit multilingual-matters.com.

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