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How to Raise Bilingual or Multilingual Children?

Questions from Parents & Our Answers

Q&A 11-20

11. Among the families who signed up for your research from Hong Kong and Guangzhou, are many raising trilingual children?

- Not many.
- The families who signed up are particularly concerned about their children's language development. Most hope that their children will speak two or three languages by the age of three. However, only about 5% of the families we worked with regularly use three languages to communicate with their children. Although some families have rich language resources (e.g., primary caregivers fluent in three or four languages), very few effectively use these resources to provide continuous, systematic, and high-quality language input to cultivate bilingual or trilingual children.

12. What is the biggest obstacle to raising trilingual children? What advice do you have for parents who are keen to raise trilingual children?

- We've identified three major obstacles: first, a lack of scientific understanding of early trilingual learning; second, insufficient language resources within the family or inefficient allocation of existing resources; and third, a lack of long-term cooperation among primary caregivers.
- A lack of scientific understanding is the primary obstacle because many parents worry that early exposure to multiple languages will cause confusion, believing that children should only learn a foreign language after mastering their native language. We often dispel these myths about language learning. We held meetings with parents of families who met our research criteria to help them understand their language resources and create the best language input plan. However, we didn't interfere with whether parents adopted or maintained our suggestions throughout the project. Each family faced unique challenges, and our role was to introduce them to various language input options by identifying their rich linguistic resources and suggesting how they could be optimized. Early trilingual acquisition is a young and developing field, and many aspects haven't been thoroughly researched. However, existing research indicates that parents keen on raising trilingual children must have a scientific understanding, employ appropriate resources, and persevere with their input plan long-term.

13. What language resources are necessary for raising trilingual children? What does efficient allocation of linguistic resources look like? Do parents and other caregivers need to speak different languages to the child?

- To raise trilingual children, the child's caregivers must include individuals fluent in each of the three languages (not necessarily the same person). The most effective approach is for each caregiver to use the language(s) in which they're most fluent with the child.
- If each primary caregiver can speak a different language to the child, and regularly spends highly interactive time with the child, the "one person-one language" (IP1L) approach is an excellent way to cultivate well-rounded trilingual children. However, not every family can achieve this. In many Hong Kong families we work with, the caregivers are the mother, grandparents, and foreign domestic helpers, while the father has limited time for meaningful interaction with the child. We've seen many cases where only the mother, out of the child's entire "caregiver team," is fluent in two or three languages. Therefore, the mother often bears the sole responsibility for providing input for two or even three languages to the child, even while holding a full-time job. Of course, we've also encountered cases where fathers

actively participate in childcare, and their warm interactions with their children have been inspiring.

14.If the child is already one year old and can understand many instructions in their parents' native language(s), and the parents decide to start speaking an additional language to the child, do parents need to use translation methods at the beginning to ensure that the child understands?

- No.
- A one-year-old child can naturally learn any language through daily interaction. Therefore, translation is unnecessary from the child's perspective. Mixing words from different languages in the same sentence may also be ineffective for the child's learning. If the parents' proficiency in the additional language is sufficient for conversational needs, they can confidently use that language in long conversations with the child. Parents can use a clear, slightly exaggerated tone, with simple, repetitive vocabulary, and fluent, coherent sentences to discuss the objects and situations immediately in front of the child (the "here-and-now principle"). This is more effective than the "translation method" for introducing a new language. Initially, some children may find the new language novel and exciting, while others may ignore or resist it. We encourage parents to persist while being sensitive to the child's emotions. Parents can gradually introduce the new language in a similar way to introducing new solid foods to a baby: if they don't accept it initially, offer a small amount. If the child doesn't accept hearing an additional language all day initially, parents can start with half an hour and gradually increase the time as the child becomes more familiar. However, if parents struggle to use the new language consistently and rely on translations to "buffer," or if they are used to mixing languages and find it difficult to change their speaking habits, a different approach is needed.

15.If the family's language resources are insufficient, but the parents' desire or need to raise trilingual children is urgent, then how can they supplement this with electronic products?

- For children under 3, electronic products can be auxiliary tools for learning foreign languages, but they must be used sensibly to avoid negative effects.
- Parents can learn foreign languages with their children using reading pens, recordings, or video programs. However, allowing children to use these devices independently or to listen to/watch programs alone without

guidance is unlikely to be very effective. We also know that prolonged screen exposure is harmful to children's vision and cognitive development. We recommend that parents learn with their children using electronic devices, for example, by watching a 5-10 minute cartoon episode in the foreign language each day. After watching the episode, parents can review the characters and plot with the child by recreating it with stuffed toys, building blocks, etc. This provides a fun and interactive way for your child to learn a new language.

16. When can you start reading books with your child? How do you choose suitable English books for children aged 0-3?

- You can start "reading" with your child once they can sit up independently. You can refer to our list of English books and usage instructions that our team has selected for children at their various developmental stages from 6 months old to 3 years old.
- Parents can begin by looking at large cards or posters with the child, pointing out the items, distinguishing colors, comparing sizes, imitating animal sounds, or identifying real objects in the home based on the pictures. These are good preparations for reading.
- After 18 months, parents may choose some simple, brightly colored, rounded-corner, palm-sized board books to let the child experience the fun of turning pages, and to establish a sense of sequence between the front and back pages.
- At 2 or 3 years old, you can choose picture books with different tasks and simple storylines. Cultivating a child's reading habits is a long-term process. Children aged 0-3 are easily drawn to new and exciting things and quickly lose interest in familiar objects. Therefore, it's important to allow children to choose books and cards they like (within reason); don't worry if they seem "obsessed" with a certain story or picture. There's no need to force children to sit still for a long time and read a book designated by the parents from beginning to end.

17. Is it a good idea to choose a language playgroup for my child to supplement the lack of language resources at home? What factors should parents pay attention to when choosing between playgroups?

- A high-quality playgroup can be a good source of language input. All other conditions being equal, the closer the playgroup teacher's language level is to

native speaker level, the better, and the more the teacher engages children in an interactive way, the better.

- Parents can try a playgroup class with their children and assess whether the teacher's speech can attract the child's attention: does the child make eye contact with the teacher? Does the child respond to the teacher with gestures or even language? Highly interactive playgroups have these characteristics: the teacher makes time to interact one-on-one with each child; the teacher adjusts their interaction strategy (eye contact and gestures) based on the children's reactions; the teacher's pronunciation is clear, with obvious changes in pitch and speed when speaking, and rich body movements. A good bilingual or trilingual playgroup will use only one language at a time, rather than relying on language mixing or translation methods to organize classroom activities.

18. Will trilingual children start speaking later than children with a single language input? About how much later?

- Possibly.
- No matter how many languages babies are learning, they must receive sufficient language input in each language before they start speaking that language. Although there is no scientific consensus on how many words or sentences comprise a "sufficient amount" for children to start speaking, it is self-evident that bilingual and trilingual children may receive less input in each language than monolingual children, because their total language input time is split into two or three parts. Therefore, multilingual children will likely start speaking later. This is different from pathological language disorders and delayed language development. My own children – two boys who systematically receive Cantonese, Mandarin, and English input – could understand basic instructions in the three languages before the age of 18 months but could only say a small number of words. Around 18 months, they began to say a large number of words across all three languages. At 2 years old, they could form short sentences. By 3 years old, they could say fluent long sentences in three languages and even surpassed monolingual children in some measures of language proficiency. Nevertheless, witnessing the child's extended "silent period" inevitably strains parents' patience. As a mother, I understand that some parents may give up on their planned trilingual input and switch to speaking only one or two languages out of anxiety for their child to speak earlier. To me, however, such cases are a pity, because it is highly likely that, as long as parents persevere in providing

systematic, comprehensive, and high-quality language input for the child, the child would start speaking multiple languages soon.

19. How is the language development of your trilingual baby Leo now? Raising a trilingual baby requires so much thought and effort. Were there any particularly gratifying moments?

- Our trilingual baby Leo has become a trilingual primary school student, and has developed a strong interest in language and linguistics. He loves reading and has developed a strong "metalinguistic awareness," often discussing linguistic issues with me.
- When Leo was young, he naturally learned three languages through the input combination of "one parent, one language" and "one day, one language." Before the age of three, Leo's Mandarin and Cantonese were stronger, while his English was weaker. Later, his strengths and weaknesses across the three languages changed. Now, English is Leo's most fluent language, while his Mandarin and Cantonese are second to his English. This is likely related to his school's language environment, which is mainly English-speaking. Since kindergarten, teachers have said that Leo is very attentive in English, Chinese, and Mandarin classes and likes to interact with his teachers. No matter which language his classmates speak, Leo can make friends with them.
- After Leo became an older brother, we found that he mainly uses his most proficient language, English, to play games and read picture books with his younger brother Louis. Leo has provided a valuable source of English input for Louis, compensating for the limitations in the time and quality of the mother's English input. Louis also actively communicates with his older brother in English.
- Compared with the older brother's development during the same period, the younger brother's trilingual development is more balanced, and his English development is better than his older brother's. This was not something we aimed for, but came as a pleasant surprise from Leo's excellent English input to Louis. Now the younger brother can also fluently use three languages and freely switch according to the situation. Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, Louis's kindergarten classes were online. Although he was only three years old, he could concentrate on listening to the teacher's instructions and interact with the teacher in Chinese, English, and Mandarin courses. Witnessing Louis's progress made us very gratified, as it confirmed that the

time and effort our family put into raising Louis as a trilingual child have paid off. You can find out more about Leo and Louis [here](#).

20. How is your research progress? What are your future research directions?

- We have completed two projects funded by the Research Grants Council that investigate bilingualism and trilingualism. The first project, '[Input and experience in early trilingual development](#)', followed children from Hong Kong and Guangzhou to track their development in Cantonese, Mandarin, and English. The second project, '[Input and caretaker proficiency in early bilingual development: mothers, helpers and toddlers](#)', investigated children from Hong Kong, with a focus on their English development. We are currently analyzing our findings to develop educational applications for parents and plan to collect additional data beyond Greater China to verify our results. Stay tuned for updates!

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