

## Bi-lingual and multi-lingual children

Two questions we are often asked by multi-lingual parents are:  
'Should I speak English or my first language at home?'  
'Will my child be confused?'

Here are a few thoughts from the Ethnic Minority & Traveller Advisory Service (EMTAS) which provides support to schools and Early Years where children speak multiple languages.

This advice is for the whole range of parents and families, from those who have very little English and may speak one or more languages at home, to those who are fluent in English as well as other languages.

### What language should parents use at home?

Parents' first language (or if not first, their most fluent) is the language of secure bonding -it's important parents use it for building secure attachment with the child. This in turn will support children's cognitive development and to develop their child's speech language and communication. This doesn't mean parents shouldn't use other languages at home as well!

### Is it an advantages to grow up multi-lingual?

It's a huge advantage to grow up using more than one language. Multilingual children achieve better results at school (for example, on average, they do better at GCSE) and get better health outcomes (for example, there's evidence multilingualism delays the onset of dementia.) Multilingual children develop better problem-solving and multi-tasking skills, as well as a range of other advantages.

### What will best support children to learn English?

Children learn English faster if they are building on firm foundations in their first language. If you can already do something in one language, it's much easier to learn to do it in another. If you know about something in your first language, this will help you make sense of it in English. For example if you know about an elephant in one language it is easy to label it in another language. On average, children with well-developed first language reach fluency in English 2 to 3 years sooner than children without.

### How might these children use language?

- They might go through an extended "silent period" on first being exposed to English in a pre-school or nursery, if they haven't heard English before (it might be better to call this a "listening period" because what children are doing is absorbing new language);
- They might "code switch" - starting sentences in one language and finishing in another;
- They might listen to parents speaking one language, but only respond in English.

All of these things are fine!

### More information

For more information have a look at:

The Best Start In Life Toolkit  
National Literacy Trust  
Speech & Language

<https://www.wiltshire.gov.uk/public-health-eyt-communication>  
<https://literacytrust.org.uk/early-years/bilingual-quick-tips>  
[www.wiltshirechildrensservices.co.uk/speech-language-therapy](http://www.wiltshirechildrensservices.co.uk/speech-language-therapy)

Best Wishes, Carrie