

# Fostering Bilingual Development

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**1. Provide good language models, preferably native (or native-like) speakers.** If your only resource is someone who isn't proficient, that's okay. Children stand to gain even if they only learn a few words of another language. But recognize that if children are to become truly bilingual, they need exposure to both languages through proficient speakers.

**2. If possible, expose your child to other children who speak the target language, not just adults.** Children learn language from adults, but often practice with other children.

**3. Decide how you feel about dialectal differences.** Some food for thought: Linguists judge language differences as good or bad based on how well they serve the speaker. For example, "Black English" or "U. S. Spanish" can be mixed blessings for children in that they may be unifying factors (a "good" consequence) or cause children to be labeled as "slow" (a "bad" consequence).

**4. Understand that children don't have to be limited to one dialect or way of speaking, but can learn code switching-**

**that is, using one dialect in one situation and another in a different situation.**

However, you may feel uncomfortable about your child learning a form of a language that isn't what you consider standard. If you are dissatisfied with the dialect your child is learning, look for different language models, if possible.

**5. Most experts in bilingualism suggest separating the two languages rather than using one to teach the other.**

Children who learn a second language through constant reference to their first language mainly learn new ways to say old things. When the two languages are each learned in separate contexts, the child gains new ways of looking at the world and has two different communication systems to talk about the new perceptions.

**6. Consider the timing of introducing the second language.** Children are capable of learning two languages at once starting at birth. However, if your concern is keeping your home language (if it's not English) in an English-speaking country, you may want to be sure home language is firmly

established before introducing English. The lure of English is so powerful that some children give up their home language once they begin to learn English.

**7. Be aware that children who are learning more than one language may speak later than children who are learning only one language.**

This is normal. If you observe this, don't worry that your child's language development is delayed.

**8.** If your child is not learning the two languages simultaneously, **make sure that the addition of the second language doesn't take away the first.** Bilingual development should be an additive process, not a subtractive one.

**9. Understand that what the child learns in one language can be transferred over to the other.**

For example, once a child can perceive and label a circle in one language, it's easy to transfer that knowledge to another language. Although the languages are being learned separately in two different contexts, there is an interdependence principle at work. The two languages are connected in the child's mind.

**10.** Don't believe the story that children simply "pick up language" quickly and easily. It may look that way, but it takes 12 years for children to develop fully in their native language, so you can't expect a second one to be fully developed overnight. **Language learning takes time.**