



Multilingual Families

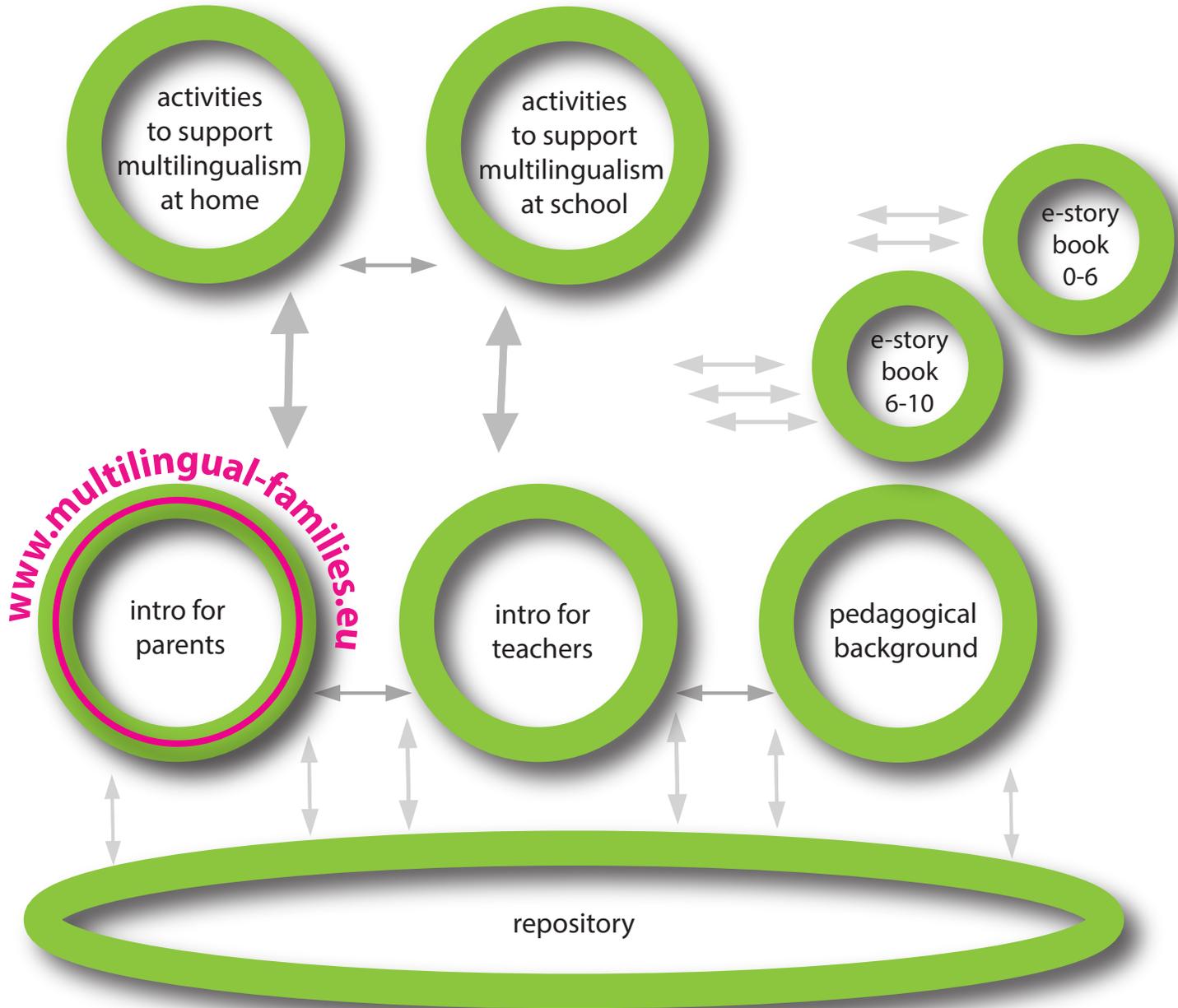
Supporting multilingual families - a linguistic treasure for Europe

# Why raise my children multilingually

## Introduction for parents



# Multilingual families map





## Multilingual Families

### CONTENTS

#### **WHY SHOULD PARENTS SUPPORT MULTILINGUALISM**

**THE POSSIBLE ADVANTAGES OF BEING MULTILINGUAL**

**WHAT CAN YOU DO TO SUPPORT MULTILINGUALISM?**

#### **QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS**

**WHAT ARE THE ADVANTAGES OF RAISING MULTILINGUAL CHILDREN?**

**IS IT NORMAL FOR CHILDREN TO LEARN TWO OR MORE LANGUAGES AT THE SAME TIME?**

**WHEN IS THE BEST TIME TO START?**

**WHAT IS THE BEST WAY TO RAISE A MULTILINGUAL CHILD?**

**IS IT TOO LATE TO INTRODUCE AN ADDITIONAL LANGUAGE WHEN A CHILD ALREADY SPEAKS ONE?**

**WHAT DO I NEED TO DO TO MAKE SURE MY CHILDREN WILL LEARN ALL THEIR LANGUAGES FULLY?**

**IS IT TRUE THAT THE CHILDREN BECOME CONFUSED WHEN LEARNING MORE THAN ONE LANGUAGE?**

**IS THE LANGUAGE ACQUISITION OF MULTILINGUAL CHILDREN DELAYED?**

**WHAT CAN I DO WHEN MY CHILD REFUSES TO SPEAK THE FAMILY LANGUAGE?**

**SHOULD FAMILY LANGUAGES (IF OTHERS THAN THE MAJORITY LANGUAGE) BE USED IN KINDERGARTENS OR SCHOOLS?**

**I WANT MY CHILDREN TO LEARN THE MAJORITY/NATIONAL LANGUAGE WELL. SHOULD I SPEAK THE MAJORITY/NATIONAL LANGUAGE WITH THEM AT HOME?**

**WHAT ARE THE MOST COMMON MISTAKES PARENTS MAKE?**

#### **BIBLIOGRAPHY**

## WHY SHOULD PARENTS SUPPORT MULTILINGUALISM

Speaking more than one language is normal. Most of the people in the world grow up speaking more than one language, not all at the same proficiency and this may vary even within a single family. For example, a mother may speak a different language to the father or the grandparents, or the languages used at the children's school. In many cases there is a common family language, in others not.

Many families in the world live in regions where more than one language is spoken. In some countries in Europe we are sometimes told that it is normal to speak only one language and that more languages can be harmful, but this is not the case.

Bringing up your children in your family languages is very important because only then can you communicate with them well in the languages you feel comfortable with. Also because only then can they communicate with their wider family possibly still in the country of origin, their grandparents, cousins and other relatives. The family languages also serve as a means of building your identity and preserving your cultural heritage, i.e. children's stories, songs etc.

But what about the dominant language of the country you live in. First of all it is the task of kindergarten and school

to provide the opportunity to learn that language, as well as other children, friends etc. You can support your children in the dominant language by initiating contacts with experts in the dominant languages. Sometimes parents do not speak the dominant language well although they speak their family languages with a high competence. Consequently parents are the experts in at least some of the family languages.

Many families with more than one language have the potential to raise their children in all the languages spoken in the family but are not sure why and how to do it. This can be due to a number of possible barriers, e.g. lack of information about (the potential) benefits of multilingualism, the pressure of those speaking the dominant language and sometimes a wish to assimilate into the new society.

Sometimes parents decide that many languages are fine but the children refuse to speak the family language, at least outside the home. Sometimes there is no provision at kindergarten or at school for learning the family languages, sometimes teachers and other people with an assumed "educational authority" tell parents that learning the dominant language is of utmost importance and family languages are "just in the way".

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The project *Multilingual Families*:

- provides information about growing up with two or more languages, learning many languages, having many languages in the family,
- provides ideas for parents, children and teachers to develop awareness and competence in many languages and to enjoy the process.

In this paper you will find information on why knowing and growing up with two or more languages can be a great advantage for children. You will also find that it is not difficult to carry out using the ideas and suggestions of the *Multilingual Families* project.

## THE POSSIBLE ADVANTAGES OF BEING MULTILINGUAL

There are a number of advantages to speak many languages. We even admire people who can speak many languages, switch from one to another, know words and phrases from “all over the world” and can communicate with “everybody”.

Nobody has to fear that speaking family languages will hurt the children socially or academically if the primary language of the community is different, on the contrary!

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*Multilingual Families* has selected **9 reasons** why it is a good idea to support your children with more than one language.

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### CREATIVITY

Multilingualism can have a beneficial effect on the development of more flexible and creative thinking (Kharkhurin, 2012).

### OPEN MINDEDNESS

Children brought up in a multilingual environment often develop an appreciation for other cultures and acceptance of cultural differences, which is a competence highly sought-after in adults (Coelho, 2012).

### FLEXIBILITY

Knowing more than one language helps children feel at ease in different environments. It creates a natural flexibility and adaptability (Cunningham-Andersson, Andersson, 2004).

### COGNITIVE ABILITIES

Multilingual children display greater cognitive flexibility, better problem solving and higher order thinking skills. The intuitive and natural way of learning languages can spur children on to a deeper and broader passion for learning in general (Baker, 2001).

### COMMUNICATION

Language learning improves communication skills in general (Boysson-Bardies, 1999).

### CONFIDENCE

Allowing children to be what they are – including their cultural and linguistic background – helps them develop a natural self-confidence (Cunningham-Andersson, Andersson, 2004).

### BROADER WORLDVIEW

Multilingualism encourages new frames of mind and global perspectives (Baker, 1998).

### ENRICHMENT

Immigrants not only bring their native language but also aspects of culture in their language (Tokuhama-Espinosa, 2001).

### DIVERSITY

Multilingual children and children of immigrants can represent a bridge to the heritage and history of their different cultures and bring to life new stories and traditions (Min, 1997).

## WHAT CAN YOU DO TO SUPPORT MULTILINGUALISM?

Children can acquire more than one language right from the beginning of life. Recent research has clearly shown that the earlier the better and even, more than one language, right from the start. Acquiring two or three languages from birth is no problem (Sorace, 2006). And it is interesting that children who do acquire more languages right from the start do not seem to have any problems, they do not even notice, it is normal for them.

To support multilingualism:

- Use all languages that are available in your family, do not trust recipes and single rules as the only way to success.
- Be relaxed about your language use. Do not panic when your children starts mixing languages, inserting words from one language into sentences from the other, code switching is normal and is a very creative use of language.
- Occasionally it takes multilingual children a little longer to start talking, do not panic, they will talk enough for the rest of their lives. Recent research has shown that children differ widely when they start to talk, so the chances are that your child is well within normal patterns (Genesee, 2007).



## QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

### WHAT ARE THE ADVANTAGES OF RAISING MULTILINGUAL CHILDREN?

There are many good reasons for raising children multilingually. Aside from the obvious advantage of being able to speak more than one language, it impacts a child positively in the sense of self-esteem, future job opportunities and ability to live and travel abroad. In addition, the child is more aware and involved in the culture of the parents' country of origin. Children who are fluent in two or more languages also have cognitive advantages in comparison to those who speak only one language (Boysson-Bardies, 1999). For example, they are better at solving problems that involve focusing on relevant information while ignoring irrelevant information. Additionally, analytical, social and literacy skills are improved when growing up with several languages.

### IS IT NORMAL FOR CHILDREN TO LEARN TWO OR MORE LANGUAGES AT THE SAME TIME?

Based on the number of children around the world who are raised speaking more than one language, multilingual acquisition is probably more "normal" than monolingualism. Most importantly, there has been considerable scientific research that is showing that young infants' brains are equipped to learn multiple languages in early childhood. These studies show that children go through the same basic milestones in language acquisition as those who learn only one language (Tabors, 1997).

### WHEN IS THE BEST TIME TO START?

The sooner, the better! Neurological studies have clearly shown that babies from the age of two months are already beginning to start preparing for the language or languages they will use later on. From the first days at home after birth the approach that has been decided should be used and stuck too. It has also been shown that a child with two or more languages finds it much easier to acquire additional languages (Eliot, 2000).

### WHAT IS THE BEST WAY TO RAISE A MULTILINGUAL CHILD?

There are many ways to raise a child with multiple languages. Sure, children may learn another language under chaotic conditions, but most families find that having a fixed language system in the home makes it easier for everyone (Tabors, 1997). Whichever way is chosen, the more consistent and transparent the approach is, the easier it is for the child. In the literature you will find some methods to raise multilingual children (One Person, One Language, or Minority Language at Home), but it is important to bear in mind that these methods are a kind of artificial constructions which are useful for theory, overviews and explanations but that in real life they are often mixed or used a little less consistently. In the long run, what feels most natural to a family will work best.

### IS IT TOO LATE TO INTRODUCE AN ADDITIONAL LANGUAGE WHEN A CHILD ALREADY SPEAKS ONE?

Absolutely not! When introducing older children to a language, with the goal of making them fluent multilinguals, the first consideration is building the motivation. After starting to speak one language, learning another language requires some effort from the child, unlike acquiring two or more languages simultaneously from birth. Motivation is the key factor.



### **WHAT DO I NEED TO DO TO MAKE SURE MY CHILDREN WILL LEARN ALL THEIR LANGUAGES FULLY?**

Learning two or more languages in infancy and early childhood is as natural as learning only one language. Young children have the innate capacity to acquire full competence in two or more languages. It has been estimated that as many as 50% of the world's population are at least bilingual (Bialystok, 2001). Multilingual children can acquire the same proficiency in the phonological and grammatical aspects of their two or more languages as monolingual children do in their one language, provided they are given regular and substantial exposure to their languages. Parents should ensure that their children are exposed to all languages for a sustained and continuous period of time.

### **IS IT TRUE THAT THE CHILDREN BECOME CONFUSED WHEN LEARNING MORE THAN ONE LANGUAGE?**

Some parents are concerned when they hear their children use sounds and words from different languages in the same utterance or conversation. They believe that it means that the child is confused and cannot separate the languages. This is a common misconception. Mixing languages is a natural and normal aspect of early multilingual acquisition. In fact, even multilingual adults mix their languages. Children borrow from other languages when they lack sufficient vocabulary to express themselves entirely in one language. Parents should not try to stop their children from mixing as they will naturally stop doing it, unless of course mixing is a frequent form of language use in the community (Baker, 2000). This has been well proven by decades of research and countless families around the world, including the many countries where multilingualism is the norm, not the exception, such as Canada, Belgium, Switzerland, and Finland.

### **IS THE LANGUAGE ACQUISITION OF MULTILINGUAL CHILDREN DELAYED?**

It used to be suggested that multilingual children were a little slower learning to speak than monolingual children. This is no longer an accepted view. (Genesee, 2007) In any case, any such difference is very small. Children who have regular and rich exposure to two or more languages on a daily or weekly basis from parents and other caregivers exhibit the same milestones in language development and at roughly the same age as monolingual children. The reason why the child's speech is delayed needn't necessarily be that the child is multilingual. Multilingual children vary from one another just as monolingual children do; some acquire their first words or use complex utterances much earlier than others.

### **WHAT CAN I DO WHEN MY CHILD REFUSES TO SPEAK THE FAMILY LANGUAGE?**

Motivating children to use two or more languages can sometimes be the biggest challenge in raising children multilingually, especially with older children. This is especially true when it comes to using a language that is not used widely outside the home (Baker, 2000). Generally, all children wish to conform to other children and they may hesitate to use the "family" language if it is not used by their friends. In these cases, parents must devise strategies to motivate their child to use the language – for example, by creating playgroups with other children who speak the language or by retaining contacts with relatives who speak the language. Otherwise, the child may not see the value in using it and may even feel embarrassed using it.

### **SHOULD FAMILY LANGUAGES (IF OTHERS THAN THE MAJORITY LANGUAGE) BE USED IN KINDERGARTENS OR SCHOOLS?**

Yes! It is important, that your family languages are cherished at kindergarten and at school. Your children experience acknowledgement of their languages by using them and experiencing other people using them as well, outside the family context. This fosters language awareness for everybody involved, provides contact with the languages and playful opportunities to use all languages. Talk to the staff in the educational institutes of your children and ask about the tradition and culture dealing with multilingualism in the institution. You are an expert for your languages and the educators probably like to hear about your cultures, language habits and ideas of use.

### **I WANT MY CHILDREN TO LEARN THE MAJORITY/NATIONAL LANGUAGE WELL. SHOULD I SPEAK THE MAJORITY/NATIONAL LANGUAGE WITH THEM AT HOME?**

You do not need to. Use the languages you are best at or you like the most. Your children can learn languages also from other people (for example from people, that are also part of the family, friends, or at kindergarten and at school). Just make sure your children have enough contact with the national language/s.

### **WHAT ARE THE MOST COMMON MISTAKES PARENTS MAKE?**

Active exposure to languages means that children not only hear other people using a language, but they are actively involved in using the language themselves. Children with only passive exposure to language, by overhearing adults for example, or watching TV, will not develop the ability to use the language proficiently. If children are to develop competence expressing them-

selves in two or more languages, they must be actively engaged in using all languages with others who know those languages. A consistent language system provides structure, predictability, and security. This in turn promotes learning. Parents should praise and encourage their children to use two or more languages and make the learning process fun and natural by planning many activities with *varied* interactions, including themselves, other adults, children of different ages, relatives, playgroups, and anything else they can think of that will expose their child to the family's language. And above all, parents should remember to praise their children frequently and provide the translation when necessary. They can also repeat the words correctly when children make a mistake, which is known as modeling (Harding-Esch, Riley, 2003).

For concrete activities you can do with your children to support their languages, and have fun at the same time go to our collection *Activities to support multilingualism at home - parents' guide on how to motivate children to use the family languages*.

<http://www.multilingual-families.eu/>



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