

Conversation One

Welcome to the Multilingual Kids Audiobook. You're listening to our discussion with an international group of young parents on the most relevant issues of bilingual and multilingual parenting. I'll try to give you concise and to-the-point answers that are scientifically grounded yet easily explained. I'll be giving you lots of real life examples and stories, which either come from my job as a consultant, or from my research projects. As an applied linguist and sociologist, I've been working with multilingual families and teachers of multilingual kids for a long time. Today our focus is on the family and the first couple of years of your kids' language acquisition. Let's get started!

Q1: What are the most important factors in bilingual parenting during the first couple of years?

Liliana: Well, it seems that I'm the one with the first question. John, in your opinion, what are the most important things we should keep in mind about bilingual parenting during the first couple of years?

*John: I'll try to summarize all the conditions you need in the first 4 or 5 years in order to succeed in bringing up your children bilingually or multilingually. The key ingredients of this 'magic recipe' are the following: **time, communication with real people, a well-chosen strategy, consistency and, finally, the need and the opportunity to speak the language.***

Let's start at the beginning. **Time is, undoubtedly, the most crucial factor in early childhood language acquisition**, although parents tend to forget about it. **The more a child is spoken to in a given language, the better they'll be able to speak it.** There is a **minimal input** that all children need to hear in order to be able to produce any language. In actual practice this means that **a young child needs to hear the target language for at least 25 but preferably 30% of their waking time, in order not only to understand, but also to speak the language.** If the language input is below these minimum figures, your child might be able to understand the most frequently-used words and expressions, but they won't be able to use them actively. Speaking a language is a much more complex and difficult task than understanding it.

In a bi- or multilingual situation it's especially important to be aware of the 25 to 30% minimal input figures if you want your child to be able to use all their languages actively. **It's very common for children of parents who have full-time jobs to get stuck at the point of comprehension, rather than active language use.** Even if the parents always speak their own language when they spend time with the child, one or two hours a day is simply not enough.

Liliana: I see, but I have a full-time job and I work long hours every day. I can't quit my job solely for the sake of my daughter's language proficiency.

John: Of course, you can't! I'm not saying you should quit your job, but **you will have to arrange for some kind of compensation for your absence if you want your daughter to be able to speak your language. The good news is that it's not necessary for all target language input to come from the same person.** Nevertheless, you should make sure that your child is exposed to your language, that she can hear it from other people around her – maybe from a nanny, from her grandparents or from anyone else. Think about it, who else could you involve in your project? Keep in mind that the first 3 to 4 years are decisive when it comes to the language development of your child.

What I see in my consulting practice is that many problems we have to deal with are directly linked to the question of time. Let me give you two examples to highlight the importance of time, in other words the amount of language input, in bringing up multilingual kids. A French dad had the following question for me: 'Why doesn't my four-year-old son speak my language when I've been using only this language with him since his birth?' The family's daily routine revealed that this child, who lives in the German-speaking part of Switzerland, hears French only from his father. Everyone else speaks to him in German. His mother is German, and he hears only German in the kindergarten and from family friends. Although his father always uses French to talk to him, this only amounts to about two hours per day. This amount of French input was enough for the boy to understand everyday questions and commands, but it wasn't enough for him to be able to speak French actively. The parents and the paternal grandparents had been waiting for two years for the boy to finally start speaking his 'father tongue'. They couldn't work out why he didn't, and quite probably they would've continued waiting in vain. Fortunately, they took my advice and started to increase the amount of French input. For example, they employed a French-speaking baby sitter, they took the child to a French-language playgroup two afternoons a week, and they got to know other French-speaking families with young children. They didn't have to wait long for the desired effect – the boy started speaking his father's language within 3 or 4 months. Slowly but surely, his second language started to develop.

Liliana: This must've been the problem in my cousin's family too. Both parents had full-time jobs, and their daughter spent the whole day in a crèche from around the age of one.

John: In a situation like this it's very unlikely that the child will learn any language other than the language used in the crèche. Lack of time may also have some potentially distressing consequences. **In multilingual situations where 3 or 4 languages are involved, we have to consciously make sure that there's at least ONE language that both the child and the parents can understand, and that they can use to speak to each other.** I've seen many situations where school-age children couldn't communicate with their own father due to the lack of a common language – even though they lived under the same roof. The father and child could only communicate with each other when the mother was present and translated for them. Obviously, there's a lot more at stake here than the child's bilingual or multilingual ability. If the child and the parent don't share a common language, there can't realistically be a genuine

personal relationship between them, which can have serious and life-long psychological consequences.

Liliana: Oh my god, that's really shocking! I would never have thought that something like that could ever happen. But there's another question that comes to mind when talking about this 25 to 30% input threshold you mentioned.

Q2: How many languages can a child acquire simultaneously?

Liliana: Does this mean that my kids will only be able to learn to speak a maximum of 3 or 4 languages?

John: It's difficult to give an exact answer to this question which would be true for all children. However, your calculation is more or less correct if we take into consideration the amount of 'minimal input' that children need in order to be able to actively speak any language. Consequently, **a young child can generally become an active speaker of three languages simultaneously. Their fourth language will usually be limited to comprehension.** But here we need to emphasise that **this only applies to situations where the child is acquiring the languages simultaneously** – that is, at the same time.

If we're talking about acquiring languages one-by-one, or about learning languages at school, **children can become proficient in more languages.** If your daughter is regularly surrounded by several languages due to your family setting, living environment or school conditions, and she's interested in new languages, she has a good chance of learning even more languages to different levels.

Exactly how many languages, nobody can say. At present, **science can't give us an exact number that would mark the limit of the human mind.** The real barrier is usually a lack of time. In addition, finding a chance to regularly use all our different languages is very difficult, if even possible, under normal circumstances.

Q3: Why are 'direct speech' and an 'appropriate strategy' so important during the first couple of years?

But let's come back to the second ingredient of our recipe: **direct speech.** It's important to understand that **a young child learns most from conversation.** Even our great-grandmothers knew instinctively that language acquisition can be helped greatly by nursery rhymes, songs, counting rhymes and games that are played in the mother's lap. When the rhythm of the language is accompanied by melody and movement, memorising it becomes much easier.

Andreas: There's such a big choice of kids' programmes on the internet these days, not to mention all the different apps. I think they can be of great help to our kids too.

John: They might be useful at a later stage, but **definitely not at the beginning of the language acquisition process**. The power of direct speech is clearly demonstrated by an experiment, which revealed that children were able to learn twice as many words and expressions when they heard them from a conversational partner than when they heard the same things transmitted through a screen, no matter what kind of screen – a TV, an iPad or an iPhone. It's very important to emphasise that, **in the first years, rather than helping, electronic devices actually hinder the child's language development**. Major research conducted in the USA proved conclusively that parents spoke to their young children much less, and reacted to their child's utterances less, during times when the child was playing with different electronic devices. What's even more noteworthy is the fact that young children themselves babbled much less when they were playing with electronic devices than when they were playing with traditional toys, or busying themselves with everyday objects. Babbling is a phase that precedes actual speech, so it's an integral part of language acquisition. If it's disrupted by some outside factor, the child will start speaking later.

In addition to time and conversation, we also **need to have an appropriate strategy**. As different families have different circumstances and expectations, the actual strategy that should be used is always **tailored to the specific family**. In order to choose the appropriate strategy, we need to know whether the parents have the same or different mother tongues. If their mother tongues are different, do they both speak each other's languages? Do they speak the majority language of the country where they live? Is the mother tongue of one of the parents the language of the country where they live? We also need to know what language the parents use to communicate with each other – do they use one parent's mother tongue, or do they use a neutral 'couple language', like English for example? We also need to consider whether they are planning a long-term stay in the country where they are living, or are they only there temporarily? Another question to think about is what kind of expectations the parents have in terms of their child's language knowledge. Do they expect their child to be able to speak, read and write in the parents' mother tongues, or are the parents satisfied if the child can just understand everyday conversations? These are just a few of the considerations we need to think about.

Whatever strategy we decide on, we need to be aware of one simple fact. **While the child is young, the easiest situation for them is to connect a specific language to a specific person**, which means that **the same person should always use the same language when speaking to them**. It's easier for the child to differentiate between languages this way. It's a bit like a well signposted road – it's much easier to reach our destination if we're shown which way to go.

Q4: Should I use only one language with my child during the first couple of years?

Andreas: But does this mean I can only use one language with my baby?

John: Yes, it does. This means that **each person should use only one language with him** – and this language should always be the same – especially in the first four or five years of his life. The emphasis here is on being systematic – **your child needs to experience consistency and predictability.**

And now we've hit on the next ingredient of our recipe, namely **consistency**. You may ask yourself, why is consistency so important when it comes to language acquisition? Because predictability and consistency **provide a feeling of safety and**, in addition, **speed up the language acquisition process**. If you are consistent in your language use, your 2-to-3-year-old will understand very clearly which language to use with who, and when to change from one language to another. It will be natural for him that, for example, mom says 'latte' for milk, and dad says 'malako' for the same white drink.

However, **if you change languages frequently in the early stages of language acquisition, your son will need to make a bigger effort to separate and differentiate his languages.** Consequently, it will take longer for him to learn them. Overall, this means that you can make your young boy's task much easier by using only one language with him.

Of course this doesn't mean that he shouldn't hear you or your husband speaking other languages with other people. With older children, however, you can use two languages without confusing them. To be honest, if you live in a bilingual environment, separating the languages completely is an almost impossible task anyway.

Liliana: *If I've got you right, a well-chosen strategy coupled with consistency are a big help for our kids to differentiate between their languages more easily, and to learn them much more quickly.*

Q5: At what age do my kids become aware of the fact that they are speaking more than one language? How do they sort the world around them in relation to their languages?

Liliana: *What I find most intriguing at this stage is how exactly do they become aware of the fact that they're speaking more than one language, and at what age does this usually happen?*

John: **Children** who grow up in a bi- or multilingual family setting **usually notice that they use more than one language between the ages of 2 and 2-and-a-half**. It shows that the child has reached a very important stage in their language development. They've divided the world according to a very important criterion – they've learnt which language to use with whom, both inside and outside the family. For children in their early years, the language a certain person speaks is as much of a basic characteristic as this person's hair colour, their hairstyle, or the glasses that they wear.

Children try to come up with certain rules about who speaks what language, according to their own logic. Of course, they sometimes make mistakes. For example, one little girl believed for quite a long time that every dark-haired man holding the hand of a child had to be addressed in Spanish. This seemed logical to her because her father was a Spanish man with dark brown hair. Let me give you another example. A young boy refused to speak his mother's language for a long time. It turned out that he thought that English was only spoken