

# Using more than one language with your child



'Bilingualism' is used here to represent anyone who can understand and use more than one language.

Using more than one language can be called bilingualism or multilingualism

Being bilingual is an asset, and using more than one language with a child does not make them any more likely to have difficulties learning to talk.

## Being bilingual

- Being bilingual is an asset and can help children connect with their culture, speak with family members and socialise with others.
- Children mostly have one language they are best at, this would be their preferred language. Early milestones such as saying their first word and putting words together are usually on time in their preferred language.
- Around 10% of all children will have long-term difficulties with language. Bilingual children have the same chance of having difficulties learning to talk as children who only learn one language.
- Bilingual children sometimes have smaller vocabularies in each language they are learning, but when you add up the number of different words they use in both languages they usually have the expected number of words overall for their development stage.
- 'Code switching' is when a bilingual person says most of a sentence in one language but swaps 1-2 words for another language. This is normal and is a way for them to 'borrow' words to make the most of their languages.

## Which language to use?

- It's important to always use the language (or languages) that you are confident with, to make sure you are giving your child natural and rich language models (your preferred language).
- Imagine language as a coat hook, when you use a language that you are good at, you model a wide range of words, grammar, sentences and sounds that are accurate – this fixes a child's knowledge of language (the coat hook) securely on to the wall. They will then have a solid base to hang another language onto.

## Supporting a child who is bilingual is the same as supporting any other child:

- Babies are born with the ability to recognise the language they heard in the womb so start using your preferred language during pregnancy when you are talking to your bump.
- Join in with your child's play and follow their lead. Talk about what they are looking at or doing in your preferred language. Use a range of words to label, describe actions, talk about how things look; feel; sound; taste, what they do, where they are etc.
- Share books in both languages. Don't worry about reading the words, you can talk about the pictures or make up a story.
- If you are using your preferred language, your child might respond with another, such as the language of the setting. This is normal and you can continue using your preferred language to help your child learn that too.
- Sometimes children go through a 'silent phase' when they start a setting that has a different language to what is spoken at home. Watch and wait to see how they settle in, and do not put pressure on them to speak.
- Remember to accept and praise communication in whatever language the child chooses to use.

Find further information

Online resources:

[Oxford Brookes Babylab](#)  
[Tiny Happy People](#),  
[Talk With Me key message 2](#)