



## Raising multilingual and bilingual children: options

### Key points

- If you or other family members speak languages other than English, you might want your child to learn these languages too.
- There are 2 main models for raising multilingual and bilingual children – one parent-one language and one environment-one language.
- You can support your child's multilingual or bilingual development through play, home, community and extended family activities.

### Why raise a multilingual or bilingual child?

If you, your partner or other people who help you raise your child – like grandparents or friends – speak languages other than English, you might want your child to grow up hearing and using these languages. Or you might want your child to grow up hearing and using another language even if you don't – for example, if you've spent time overseas during your child's early years.



Raising multilingual or bilingual children has many benefits. (<https://raisingchildren.net.au/babies/connecting-communicating/bilingualism-multilingualism/bilingualism>). For example, it can improve communication and bonds in your immediate family. It can also be good for your family's sense of cultural identity and belonging, and your child's thinking, literacy and other language skills.

### Models for raising multilingual or bilingual children

The way you help your child learn more than one language will probably **depend on where and how often your child can hear and use the language** or languages. For example, your child might hear and use the language a lot at home with a parent, partner, family member or friend. Or your child might hear and use the language only in certain situations – for example, at a grandparent's home.

Here are 2 models that can help with your child's language development.

#### One parent-one language model

The one parent-one language model might work for you if you, your partner, a family member or a friend have different languages.

For example, if you're an English speaker and your partner, relative or friend is a Mandarin speaker, you would speak English with your child and the other person would speak Mandarin with them.

You can also use this model if 2 people in your household speak different heritage languages. For example, if you speak Arabic and your partner speaks French, you would each speak your own language to your child at home.

If you both speak English as well, you might choose to use English with your child outside the home. If you speak a heritage language with them outside the home, that's fine too. Your child will have plenty of opportunities to learn and use English at school and in the community.

The one parent-one language model works best if everyone understands each other's languages, even if they can't speak them. This way no-one feels left out when you speak your language to your child.

### **One environment-one language model**

In this model all family members speak a heritage language at home, but your child uses English outside the home.

For example, you might have migrated from Ethiopia to Australia and speak Amharic to your child at home. But your child speaks English with their friends and teachers at school.

Or you and your partner have hearing impairments and you're raising a hearing child. Your child might learn Auslan at home and use English in the hearing community.

The one environment-one language model means that your child hears and uses their heritage language a lot at home because everyone else in the home is using it.



Your child might be less willing to use their heritage language or languages as they get older. If this happens, try to keep using their heritage language with them, especially at home. Even if they start responding more in English, they'll still benefit in the short and long term from hearing the language.

### **Tips for raising your multilingual or bilingual child**

These practical tips can support your child's multilingual or bilingual development.

#### **Play and games**

- Read and tell stories in your heritage language, and encourage your child to join in. Use dress-ups and be creative!
- Play games in your heritage language, especially games that focus on language – for example, 'I spy', bingo, 'Who am I?' and memory.

- Sing songs (<https://raisingchildren.net.au/babies/connecting-communicating/bilingualism-multilingualism/singing-in-a-second-language-activity-for-children-0-6-years>), dance and play music in your heritage language. Children love music, and melody is a great way to help them remember things.
- Look for child-friendly word game apps in your heritage language.
- Use AI to create new and engaging experiences in your heritage language. For example, use AI to write poems, songs or bedtime stories with personalised names and locations.

### **Community activities**

- Look for schools, child care centres, playgroups and multilingual or bilingual programs where your child can use their heritage language.
- Organise playdates with other children who speak your child's heritage language.
- Take your child to shops and other venues where they can experience their heritage language being used.
- Host visitors who speak your heritage language or visit countries where the language is used. This can significantly boost your child's language development and their interest in your heritage language and culture.
- Go to the library or your local community centre and borrow CDs, DVDs, picture books, age-appropriate fiction and magazines in your heritage language.
- Look for cultural activities that you and your child can do together to tap into your family's cultural heritage and identity. For example, Harmony Week (<http://www.harmony.gov.au/>) is widely celebrated across Australia in March each year.

### **At home**

- Talk to your children in your heritage language from birth.
- Listen to podcasts in your heritage language, including popular music programs and programs for teenagers.
- If you have family and friends who live overseas, encourage your child to connect with them online or using video chat.
- Think about what your child is interested in – for example, soccer, music, TV shows, cooking and so on. Try incorporating your heritage language into these

interests. For example, you could find a typical recipe from your community and cook it together using only your heritage language.

- Watch movies or sport in your heritage language – for example, through satellite TV or online streaming services. You can sometimes switch the audio or subtitles of English content into other languages.
- Help your older or teenage child find safe, interest-based online communities in their heritage language. Just be mindful of pre-teen internet safety (<https://raisingchildren.net.au/pre-teens/entertainment-technology/cyberbullying-online-safety/internet-safety-9-11-years>) and teenage internet safety (<https://raisingchildren.net.au/teens/entertainment-technology/cyberbullying-online-safety/internet-safety-teens>).

### **Languages other than English**

- Arabic ([https://raisingchildren.net.au/\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0026/102959/Raising-multilingual-bilingual-children-options-Arabic.pdf](https://raisingchildren.net.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0026/102959/Raising-multilingual-bilingual-children-options-Arabic.pdf)) (PDF: 223kb)
- Dari ([https://raisingchildren.net.au/\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0018/102960/Raising-multilingual-bilingual-children-options-Dari.pdf](https://raisingchildren.net.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0018/102960/Raising-multilingual-bilingual-children-options-Dari.pdf)) (PDF: 245kb)
- Dinka ([https://raisingchildren.net.au/\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0019/102961/Raising-multilingual-bilingual-children-options-Dinka.pdf](https://raisingchildren.net.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0019/102961/Raising-multilingual-bilingual-children-options-Dinka.pdf)) (PDF: 215kb)
- Hakha Chin  
([https://raisingchildren.net.au/\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0020/102962/Raising-multilingual-bilingual-children-options-Hakha-Chin.pdf](https://raisingchildren.net.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0020/102962/Raising-multilingual-bilingual-children-options-Hakha-Chin.pdf)) (PDF: 163kb)
- Karen ([https://raisingchildren.net.au/\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0021/102963/Raising-multilingual-bilingual-children-options-Karen.pdf](https://raisingchildren.net.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0021/102963/Raising-multilingual-bilingual-children-options-Karen.pdf)) (PDF: 193kb)
- Persian ([https://raisingchildren.net.au/\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0022/102964/Raising-multilingual-bilingual-children-options-Persian.pdf](https://raisingchildren.net.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0022/102964/Raising-multilingual-bilingual-children-options-Persian.pdf)) (PDF: 250kb)
- Simplified Chinese  
([https://raisingchildren.net.au/\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0023/102965/Raising-multilingual-bilingual-children-options-Simplified-Chinese.pdf](https://raisingchildren.net.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0023/102965/Raising-multilingual-bilingual-children-options-Simplified-Chinese.pdf)) (PDF: 325kb)
- Swahili ([https://raisingchildren.net.au/\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0024/102966/Raising-multilingual-bilingual-children-options-Swahili.pdf](https://raisingchildren.net.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0024/102966/Raising-multilingual-bilingual-children-options-Swahili.pdf)) (PDF: 166kb)
- Tamil ([https://raisingchildren.net.au/\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0025/102967/Raising-multilingual-bilingual-children-options-Tamil.pdf](https://raisingchildren.net.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0025/102967/Raising-multilingual-bilingual-children-options-Tamil.pdf)) (PDF: 240kb)

- Vietnamese  
([https://raisingchildren.net.au/\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0026/102968/Raising-multilingual-bilingual-children-options-Vietnamese.pdf](https://raisingchildren.net.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0026/102968/Raising-multilingual-bilingual-children-options-Vietnamese.pdf)) (PDF: 200kb)
- 

## Acknowledgements

---

Our content is regularly reviewed for quality and currency. The last review of this article was by Dr Ruying Qi, Associate Professor in Bilingualism, Linguistics and Language Teaching, Director of Bilingualism Research Lab, and Associate Dean International, School of Humanities and Communication Arts, Western Sydney University. Scientific Advisory Board (<https://raisingchildren.net.au/about-us/our-experts-partners/scientific-advisory-board>) review was provided by Emeritus Professor Susan Moore.

---

## References

---

- Antoniou, M. (4 January 2016). Debunking common myths about raising bilingual children. *The Conversation*. Retrieved 4 October 2023 from <https://theconversation.com/debunking-common-myths-about-raising-bilingual-children-50592> (<https://theconversation.com/debunking-common-myths-about-raising-bilingual-children-50592>).
- Baker, C., & Wright, W.E. (2021). *Foundations of bilingual education and bilingualism* (7th edn). Multilingual Matters.
- Di Biase, B., & Qi, R. (2015). Why speaking two languages is advantageous for the speaker. *China Language Strategies*, 2(1), 23-29.
- Clyne, M. (2005). *Australia's language potential*. University of New South Wales Press.
- Cunningham, U. (2020). *Growing up with two languages: A practical guide for multilingual families and those who support them* (4th edn). Routledge.
- De Houwer, A. (2009). *Bilingual first language acquisition*. Multilingual Matters.
- Festman, J., Poarch, G., & Dewaele, J-M. (2017). *Raising multilingual children*. Multilingual Matters.
- Guo, Q., & Qi, R. (2024). A study of bilingual acquisition of wh-questions of a Mandarin-English bilingual preschool child from China to Australia. *Education Sciences*, 14(9), Article 978. <https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci14090978> (<https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci14090978>).
- King, K., & Mackey, A. (2007). *The bilingual edge: Why, when, and how to teach your child a second language*. Harper Perennial.

Meisel, J. (2019). *Bilingual children: A guide for parents*. Cambridge University Press.

Pauwels, A. (2016). *Language maintenance and shift*. Cambridge University Press.

Qi, R. (2022). *The bilingual acquisition of Chinese children*. The Commercial Press.

Saunders, G. (1988). *Bilingual children: From birth to teens*. Multilingual Matters.

Yip, V., & Matthews, S. (2007). *The bilingual child: Early development and language contact*. Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511620744>  
(<https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511620744>).

Zurer Pearson, B. (2008). *Raising a bilingual child: A step-by-step guide for parents*. Living Language.

**Last updated or reviewed**

29-08-2025

---

SUPPORTED BY



**Australian Government**  
**Department of Social Services**

Raising Children Network is supported by the Australian Government. Member organisations are the Parenting Research Centre and the Murdoch Childrens Research Institute with The Royal Children's Hospital Centre for Community Child Health.

At raisingchildren.net.au we acknowledge the Traditional Custodians of the land on which we live, gather and work. We recognise their continuing connection to land, water and community. We pay respect to Elders past and present.

[Privacy statement](#) | [Terms of use](#)

© 2006-2026 Raising Children Network (Australia) Limited. All rights reserved.

Warning: This website and the information it contains is not intended as a substitute for professional consultation with a qualified practitioner.