

Bilingual homes widen kids' scope

A two-language family often proves to be a wonderful gift for the child's development

By Mary Sinanidis

A PERSON'S language has an effect on one's identity. Knowing two languages can make the world seem a wider place and offers the opportunity of having two different ways of perceiving life. True bilingualism, however, needs to start at an early age, and one need not be "good at languages" to achieve it.

Natural bilingualism is not the same as learning a foreign language. It is all-encompassing and ingrained within a family's cultural background. It isn't something that needs to be acquired, but simply allowed to exist.

"Motherese" is the earliest language a baby hears," says speech therapist Valia Galyfianaki. "It is that special way mothers and fathers have of talking to their children with exaggerated intonation. And for this to be successful, it needs to be spontaneous. That's why each parent needs to speak to the child in the language they feel most comfortable using."

In bicultural relationships, each parent should speak to the child in his or her native tongue. The same applies to immigrants who often drop their home language to help the child to better integrate.

"It is wrong for parents to use a language they have not fully mastered when speaking to their child as the child will hear the desired language being misused," says Galyfianaki, adding that a child is more confused by not hearing a language used correctly rather than having to deal with two languages simultaneously.

Be consistent

The trick to remember when exposing a child to two or more languages is consistency.

"The child should hear each parent speaking one language when directing speech towards it," says Galyfianaki, adding that children may get confused when parents keep speaking different languages.

Nonetheless, even this can be overcome, provided there is consistency. For example, the parent speaks another language only when in the company of others or at a certain place.



Bilingual education starts early at the American Community Schools of Athens

Many parents are often criticised by other family members and people who feel that bilingualism can cause confusion and intellectual delay in the child.

"There is the perception that some children may start talking later. However, this is not always the case," Galyfianaki says. "At some point, children may start mixing languages. This is not a case of genuine confusion caused by the child not able to tell languages apart but due to code-switching languages and experience. Most bilingual children will use both languages at once during the early stages of their language development, grabbing the first word that comes to mind regardless of its language. This is a transitional stage."

In many cases, the children themselves may feel negative when using the parent's language. "This may be because they feel more proficient in the dominant language or because they feel that most people are speaking one particular language," says Galyfianaki. In such cases, the child should not feel pressured. "The language will be spoken when the child feels ready. Patience is needed."

Mental agility

The benefits of speaking two languages are numerous. A 2004 study at York University in Canada stated that speaking two languages enhances mental agility and can even offset mental decline in old age. The same study found that speaking two languages can increase cognitive abilities, resulting in better marks. Bilinguals are also more employable and average greater salaries than monolinguals.

In international schools such as the American Community Schools of Athens (ACS), there are children of many backgrounds communicating in English.

"English is the school's main language.

However, there is a great deal of cultural diversity at the school," student services director Peggy Pelonis says. The obvious benefits include true bilingualism so that opportunities provided by growing globalisation are more accessible than at mainstream Greek schools.

In schools such as this, a number of students commute between at least two cultures and a number of different languages. "The multiracial environment means greater tolerance and bilingual awareness beyond linguistic competence. One of the school's greatest challenges is conflict resolution. For instance, we have students of both Arab and Israeli backgrounds and have worked as a school to foster peace," Pelonis says. "We participate in community activities also and children are also exposed to wider Greek society."

Schools like ACS are equipped to deal with multilingualism. Students less proficient in English are given extra training with English as a Second Language (ESL) help and staff are fully trained to deal with integrating various cultures in one classroom.

Unfortunately, this is not the case for immigrants in Greek state schools. Non-Greek-speaking children entering the Greek classroom are expected to integrate themselves. Ultimately, exposure will lead them to become bilingual.

Benefits of bilingualism

- Enhances a child's sense of identity
- Boosts cognitive performance
- Establishes greater racial tolerance
- Increases future social and employment opportunities
- Offsets age-related declines in mental performance

though this can be a traumatic process.

"They enter an environment where they can't understand what is being said, and this is stressful," says psychologist Eirini Sophianopoulou, head of the Museum of Children's Emotions.

Sophianopoulou believes the correct way of going about bilingualism is calmly, naturally and without stress. "Unfortunately, Greek state schools don't have the infrastructure required to integrate children of different backgrounds," she said. "Much is left up to individual teachers, who don't always have the required know-how, and this ultimately can affect the learning experience."

In bilingualism, as is the case in learning and life, it isn't just the results that count, but the opportunities presented for growth and self-awareness. Benefits are many, provided the parents feel comfortable with their choice.

Kids' stuff

- Workshops focused on teens take place at Evangeliki Sholi (cnr of 4 Lesvou and Ayia Sofias sts, Nea Smyrni) at 7-9pm. On March 23 it's "The Teen Chooses his Profession: Parents' Role" and on March 30 it's "Professions of the Future in a Constantly Changing Work Market". A conference takes place at the Eugenides Foundation's Planetarium (387 Syngrou Avenue, Palaio Faliro) at 7-9pm on April 6. For more info call GRASEP's offices at 210-933-0177. Admission is free.
- Stories about the stars and planets are presented at the Eugenides Foundation Planetarium (387 Syngrou Avenue, Palaio Faliro) at noon on March 21 and March 28 to mark 2009, the International Year of Astronomy. Admission is free. Book in advance by calling 210-946-9632.
- Children over 8 years of age have the opportunity of being DJs and taking part in creative dance at the Sampi Centre for Alternative Training and Therapy (19 Karatheodoroi St, Neo Psychiko, near the Katchaki Metro station, tel 210-674-6875). Workshops take place from 4pm to 6pm each Monday and Wednesday and are priced at 20 euros (50 euros per month).
- Parents and children can partake in the free tour at the Museum of Cycladic Art (4 Neofytou Douka St, Kolonaki) each Sunday at 11am. The tour includes a game focused on daily life in ancient Greece. Admission is free for those under the age of 18. Book in advance by calling 210-729-4220.
- Spring theatre workshops based on Dimitra Psygoyiou's story, *Mygdalia and the Moon*, take place each Wednesday at 7pm at Playground (48 Plastrina St, Nea Smyrni, tel 210-931-0846). Admission is 12 euros and includes toast, juice and admission to the play park.

Correction

IN LAST week's story 'Neighbourhood bully', please note the corrected helpline number of the Association for the Social and Mental Welfare of Children and Teenagers (EPSYRE): 801 801 1177 - 'Helpline Connection'.

Parenting tips

THERE should be consistency and persistence when using one language with the child. The parent should try to speak one particular language when directing speech to the child.

Do not mix languages in the same conversation. Immerse your child in the second language by attending plays, concerts and films in that language and listening to songs.

Make your child feel proud of the languages being taught by learning cultural facts about the country where it is spoken.

Visit the country where the language is spoken. Find playgroups and activities where parents and children speaking the specific language may meet - contact the country's embassy for help.

Do not pressure your child into speaking the language if the child isn't ready.

Acknowledge a child's language achievements and be encouraging.

Correctly repeat wrong phrases and words rather than intervene in a child's conversation flow.

Do not feel uncomfortable when strangers or family members criticise you for using the language they don't understand as your child will tune into this.

If the child has below-average intelligence and is generally having difficulties achieving milestones, get professional advice from a speech therapist on how bilingualism should be approached.