

May I Have a Word?

By **Ana Paula G. Mummy, MS, CCC-SLP**
www.thespeechstop.com

September 5, 2011

The Right to Bilingualism?

Volume 1, Issue 2

This article stems from recent conversations I have had with other speech and language professionals and the appalling realization that there are speech/language pathologists today who still advocate for monolingualism in minority children, especially children with language and/or developmental delays. I should not have to mention the overabundance of published literature available on the importance of the home language, but I will reiterate that the overwhelming benefits of bilingualism, home language use, and bilingual language intervention are highlighted over and over again in the current literature by devoted researchers and experts everywhere.

Suppose the research was silent on home language use, even then, it should go without saying that the most influential people in the lives of children with language/developmental delays are their parents and family members who love them unconditionally and who strive to give them the best quality of life despite challenges they may face. This is why it is so puzzling that, when dealing with bilingual families and children with language/developmental delays, especially severe delays, SLPs often do away with the most important tool parents have to facilitate language, emotional, and social growth in their children – the home language! Time and time again we hear of SLPs recommending that parents stop speaking the home language to their children since the community language is the language they'll need to be successful at school, and since after all, they have to learn to function in the community! My rebuttal, however, is, how will children learn to function in the community when they're unable to function in their own homes? SLPs also defend their "choose one language" position (or more often than not, "Choose English!") by stating they are reducing the language demands placed on the child in order to promote language growth, but instead they are exacerbating the language demands placed on the child by making them unable to communicate with the most important and influential communication partners they have – their parents!

When loving parents take the advice of well-meaning but misguided SLPs and stop using the home language, they unfortunately believe the opinion of the "professional" surely is best for their child, and they humbly comply even at the expense of their family dynamics. When we as professionals remove the home language, we strip parents and families of the following:

- 1) Their ability to love and nurture their children in ways that are most natural and comfortable for them. The language of bonding and nurture surely is the home language, and without it, a chasm is formed in the family and ultimately everyone

- 2) Their ability to help their children connect to and identify with their minority culture and to cultivate relationships with other relatives who do not speak the majority language.
- 3) Their ability to provide quality and consistent language input since they're being forced to use a community language in which they are not proficient.

As a parent raising my children bilingually, I cannot imagine my children knowing me fully without knowing my native language. My native language and culture are an inseparable part of who I am, and without them, my children would be missing part of my identity. I cannot imagine being stripped of the privilege of passing down my language and culture to them even if one of them was language/developmentally delayed. As an immigrant to the U.S. who has been here for more than 20 years, to this day it is unnatural and awkward for me to speak to my parents in English even though they are now fluent English speakers. It took my parents close to 10 years to reach this place though, so had they stopped speaking our home language when we moved to the U.S., we undoubtedly would be like strangers today due to a prolonged period of intercepted communication.

When we as speech and language professionals continue making detrimental recommendations despite the wealth of research that is readily available to guide us in our decision-making and subsequent recommendations, in essence we are negating and devaluing the arduous labor of every researcher and professional who has attempted to steer us in the right direction based on valid and reduplicated results.

Furthermore, making parents choose English is often a self-serving solution that is easy and convenient for us when providing language services, a solution with detrimental long-term consequences we don't pause to consider. The optimal solution would be to find or create alternative means of providing language services through bilingual paraprofessionals/aides or by training parents and giving them the resources to become integral parts of the intervention process. These children and their families have a right to their bilingualism!

"One never regrets knowing several languages but one can certainly regret not knowing enough, especially if one's own development is at stake."

François Grosjean