

May I Have a Word?

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Why Should Parents Talk to Their Children in Their Native Language?

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As a speech-language pathologist and as a multilingual mother of bilingual children, I am finding myself shocked and confused at the number of parents I run into who have chosen not to speak their native language to their children for various reasons or who have been persuaded to believe that speaking their native language to their children will hurt them socially or academically if the primary language of the community is different.

There are so many great articles and literature (based on good research) available on the topic of bilingualism and its benefits, even for children who may be experiencing language delays, that it seems redundant to write on the issue, but I feel compelled to do so because the passing down of a parent's native language appears to be diminishing more and more.

So why should parents talk to their children in their native language?

The first and simplest reason is because that is the language in which they are likely to be most dominant or proficient, which in turn is the language in which they are able to provide quality language input as well as support effectively and consistently. Even if a parent is able to pick up the language of the community, that parent's vocabulary, grammar skills, and ease of communication will probably remain stronger in the native language. I've often heard of recommendations from professionals and educators for parents to stop speaking the native language so that confusion is not created, so that language delays won't occur, so that children can do well in school, but the research literature says the exact *opposite!*

The other occurrence that appears to be more prevalent is for the native language to be spoken from birth to preschool with a sudden shift to the community language once the child enters early intervention programs or school. The problem with this is that the very foundation of language (which was formed through the native language) is being pulled out from under the child in order to promote a new language. The research shows that children with strong first language skills are more ready and able to

learn a second language. In other words, it's difficult to build a second language if the first language foundation is not established and supported WHILE the second language is being learned. To put a halt on the native language will only hurt the child's language growth, and long-term negative effects will be inevitable.

I've said this before, but I reiterate that children must be able to function/communicate effectively in their homes before they can function/communicate out in the community, so the native language cannot be stripped away, even for children with language delays.

So if you are a bilingual parent reading this, or a professional or educator guiding bilingual parents, here are some tips for bilingual parents of school-age children.

You can still help with homework, projects, or assignments that are in the community language. You can read the assignment's text or the given passages in the community language. Just be sure that all of the verbal interaction around that homework or reading activity remains in the native language. In other words, give the instructions in the native language. Give explanations or clarify questions in the native language. Discuss passages and their meaning in the native language. Code switching, or the alternating between two languages, is a normal part of communication in bilingual individuals, and it does not promote or show signs of confusion. It's perfectly acceptable and appropriate for bilinguals.

And in everyday conversation and family routines, during family outings and celebrations, speak your native language!!! Children need to hear *quantity* and *quality language input* in order to have strong language skills, and parents are the primary individuals who can provide the language input needed in the native language.

Professionals, educators, and parents should be working together so that the native language is flourishing at home!