

May I Have a Word?

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Losing Language: The Subtle Epidemic

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Even though I've lived in the United States for 25 years, not speaking to my children in my native language (Portuguese), was never an option that even crossed my mind. When I began this journey of simultaneous bilingualism with my children, I believed my determination that they be bilingual was common among parents in bilingual families. To my dismay, however, I am finding that globally, parents who pass down their native language to their children are in the minority *if* the language of the community is different, especially when the majority language is a highly esteemed language such as English. In my mind, this reality is creating an epidemic of language loss, and here are the three primary reasons why I find this is a subtle yet harmful epidemic.

The native language is the language of bonding. The native language (most often the dominant language) is the language in which parents are able to share their affection, their emotions, their feelings, their opinions. It's extremely difficult to deeply share your heart in a language in which you are not dominant or confident. In order to instruct, to correct and discipline, to instill character, to praise and encourage, to express humor, to share sorrows, to share victories, one must be able to dominate the language in which all of these are communicated.

An eBook entitled *Mother-Baby Bond: The Biology of Love*, by theVisualMD.com, states: "Ultimately, all bonds are built on the cornerstone of communication. The fundamental bond between mother and child is the result of an ongoing conversation conducted on multiple levels, from the physiological to the emotional, cognitive, and social."

One study by Nancy McElwain and colleagues (C. Booth-LaForce, J. Lansford, X. Wu, and J. Dyer), in the journal of *Child Development*, shows that "children who were securely attached to Mom at age three showed more open emotional communication with mothers and better

language ability at age four and a half."

Dr. Deepak Chopra, renowned physician and author, states: "When a mother is bonding with her baby, all of the elements of mother-infant bond are mediated through biology: the smell, the skin-to-skin contact, the facial expressions, eye movements, body language, the kissing, the cooing, the cuddling, the tone of the mother's voice, the baby talk. This is all part of the orchestration of bonding between the mother and the baby."

The take-home point here is, effective and bond-forming communication must occur in the language in which the parent is most comfortable, dominant, and confident.

The native language is the language of competent input by the parent. The native language is the language which parents are able to effectively foster and stimulate since their vocabulary, grammar structure, intonation patterns that define meaning, and so on will be strongest and most complex in their native language.

The native language is the language of connection. The native language is the language that keeps families connected across generations. When living in a different culture, many extended family members don't speak the majority language of the new culture. If the native language is not reinforced, chasms are formed between family members because of language loss. Imagine the sorrow of a grandmother being unable to communicate with her long-awaited grandchild!

So how do we fight this epidemic? Let's educate parents (and professionals) and reassure them that the native language is extremely important! And let's invest all our resources to promote native language use at home and its growth among bilingual families!