

May I Have a Word?

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Will All My Efforts as a Bilingual Parent Be in Vain?...Don't Lose Heart!

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At about 30 weeks in my first pregnancy, I remember sitting at my laptop for hours listening to children's songs and compiling lyrics for future reference. It was a tedious exercise of play-stop-rewind-play-stop-rewind-play. What in the world was I doing? I was relearning old childhood songs in Portuguese that had long faded from my memory. I was only weeks away from giving birth to my long-awaited firstborn child, and I was determined that she would be bilingual. A realization came to me though, that after living in the United States for more than 20 years, though I could still speak, read, and write in my first language fluently, I had forgotten popular rhymes and children's songs I grew up with, I had lost "baby talk" in Portuguese, and I was rusty in many idiomatic expressions of everyday life and specialized jargon related to babies and baby routines.

So in essence, I became a student of Portuguese again, but with a very specific purpose in mind, that relating to my baby in Portuguese would be a natural and constant practice in which I felt confident. I also purchased every Portuguese or Portuguese/English children's book that Amazon carried, along with a DVD series in Portuguese similar to *Baby Einstein*, in order to create more opportunities for engaging in Portuguese. By the time my daughter was born, I felt fully ready to embark on the journey of bilingualism, and my American husband was fully behind me in the effort even at the expense of him not understanding. Interestingly enough, she was born on the anniversary date of my family's immigration to the US!

I intentionally spoke only in Portuguese to my daughter from the moment she took her first breath, and my husband spoke primarily in English, using some learned Portuguese words here and there as he pleased. Early on though, speaking in Portuguese to her didn't seem to be what I naturally "defaulted" to, but I continued anyway. I realized that due to primary, secondary, and post-secondary schooling in English, English had really become my dominant language, so sticking with Portuguese was a conscious effort initially, an effort that eventually became effortless and natural with time and persistence.

I made sure that all of my interactions with her (i.e. talking, playing, reading, singing, eating, dressing, bathing, etc.) were in Portuguese because I was her only source of Portuguese since she had limited opportunity to be around Portuguese-speaking relatives and because we lived in a fairly monolingual community. At the beginning of her language development, she showed fairly equal understanding of both languages and she spoke more Portuguese words than English words...I was thrilled! Gradually though, I saw a shift to English preference and dominance, where she would choose English even when I was strictly speaking to her in Portuguese...I was crushed and confused! Would all of my efforts be in vain? What had I done wrong?

As I continued in Portuguese, however, I consciously did three things. I attempted to increase her opportunities for Portuguese interaction and to create and maintain a greater "need" for Portuguese in her environment. I also began to give her positive verbal reinforcement for speaking to me in Portuguese, statements (in Portuguese) as simple as "I love it when you speak to mommy in Portuguese!" Not surprisingly, I began to see the reintegration of her Portuguese use. I realized that the fluctuation over time in children is normal as they navigate through the languages in their environment. My job was to keep the language input constant and to maintain a need for Portuguese in her life.

Some take-home points as a bilingual mother and professional:

- If your child is showing a preference for the majority or community language, continue responding and engaging in the minority language. So many parents shift to the majority language when this occurs, so make a deliberate decision to keep speaking, to keep praising, and to keep modeling correct vocabulary and grammar use, especially when you see them trying but struggling to use the minority language.
- Even with greater exposure to the majority language within the majority culture, children are capable of developing language simultaneously in the languages of consistent exposure and quality input.
- Sudden drops in expressive ability in the minority language may occur once the majority language is introduced and as majority language skills become more complex, however, the minority language skills are not gone and will gradually increase again with continued exposure and input, so don't give up!
- If you would like to read a more detailed discussion on simultaneous bilingualism, please check out my articles *Convergence: When Two Languages Meet (Parts 1 and 2)* on www.thespeechstop.com. There I share the results of a longitudinal case study I completed on my daughter's simultaneous language development or bilingual first language acquisition.

Today my firstborn is almost 4 years old. She loves to chat with my parents in Texas and my extended family in Brazil via Skype. When I hear her talking, joking, and laughing with my dad in Portuguese, all the effort and stress and moments of difficulty just melt away. And when my now 2-year-old son says to me in Portuguese that he just pottied in his diaper, instead of being frustrated that he didn't ask me to go in the toilet, I smile because even those Portuguese words sound so beautiful!