

29 Tips for Raising Bilingual Kids

By [Adam Beck](#)

Raising a child with good bilingual ability can be a significant challenge. How do you support the minority language so that it keeps pace with the relentless development of the majority language?

Here are 29 tips for busy parents to help increase the odds of success.

1. Start early

If you're proactive from the start, you'll stand a much better chance of nurturing a good balance in the child's bilingual ability. From birth to age six or seven is a critical time for two reasons: 1) this is the period young brains are most primed for language, and 2) if the child attends elementary school in the majority language, it grows more difficult to "rebalance" the two languages after that. In other words, the investment of time and energy up front will make it easier to foster the balance you seek, and then maintain that balance throughout childhood. Playing "catch up" with the minority language is much harder!

2. Prioritize it

Making bilingualism a priority goes hand in hand with being proactive. If the development of your child's minority language isn't one of your family's highest priorities, chances are the majority language will quickly come to be dominant and the minority language will be relegated to a more passive role. Don't underestimate how fast this can happen once the child enters the world and spends the bulk of his hours bathed in the language of the wider community. Make the minority language a priority from the get-go and you'll strengthen the odds of achieving long-term success.

3. Don't leave it to chance

Don't let the whims of circumstance determine the outcome. You have to actively shape the situation, on an ongoing basis, so your child will receive sufficient input in the minority language to counterbalance the weight of exposure coming from the language of your community. Some take a more laissez-faire approach, saying that the minority language can be picked up later, when the child is older. That may be true, to some extent, but it disregards the natural desire of many parents to interact with their children in their mother tongue throughout the childhood years.

4. Set a goal

Set a clear goal for your child's ability in the minority language. Will you be content with oral fluency, and less concerned with reading and writing? Or is literacy important to you, too, and you'd like to see her read and write at the level of a monolingual child? Whatever your goal is, articulate it, and make sure that your efforts match the goal you seek. Good reading and writing ability are attainable, but this goal will require a diligent commitment from both you and your child.

5. Get informed

By informing yourself on the subject of children and bilingualism, you'll be better able to promote the development of your child's language proficiency. Turn to helpful books, online resources, and other parents to broaden your knowledge and ideas. Seek out associations on bilingualism or parenting in your region for further support and comradery.

6. Ignore the naysayers

Some people, even those who are otherwise well-educated, may warn that your child will become “confused” or suffer other hardships when learning two languages at once. Don’t let such comments deter you. At the same time, take people’s prescriptions with a grain of salt. There is no “one size fits all” when it comes to families raising bilingual children. In my case, I’m eager to hear about others’ successful experiences—because maybe I can adopt or adapt those strategies for my own family—but only I can really decide what’s appropriate for my particular situation.

7. Adopt a strategy

How will you use the two languages within your family? Two common strategies are the “one person one language” approach (where each parent speaks his or her mother tongue) and the “minority language at home” approach (where both parents use the minority language at home and the majority language is acquired from the community). Whatever strategy you choose, the important thing is making sure that the child has a natural need to use the minority language and receives sufficient daily input in that language. The family should then stick consistently to its strategy, unless a change in circumstance warrants a change in approach.

8. Decide on schooling

The language strategy you choose to adopt may also depend on the schooling decisions you pursue. Will your child attend school in the majority language? The minority language? Some combination of the two? Maybe homeschooling? Whatever you decide, look broadly at your child’s language exposure and seek to maintain an effective balance between the two languages. **For the minority language, a good target would be 25 hours of exposure per week.** (That’s roughly 30% of the child’s waking hours, depending on routine. Anything less than 20 hours a week could be a cause for concern.) Conversely, if your child attends school in the minority language, you may need to shore up certain aspects of the majority language—particularly reading and writing—with additional support.

9. Seize each day

A child’s bilingual development is a long-term process, but it’s a process that can only be advanced bit by bit, day by day, through regular habits and routines. Thus, the idea of “seizing each day”—taking action day in and day out—is at the very heart of this challenge. Strive to be mindful of your long-range goal and commit to doing your honest best, each day, to move forward another few small steps. Remember that the majority language will continue its relentless development, so you must be as consistent as you can, as persistent as possible, when it comes to providing minority language support.

10. Make it fun

There’s no getting around the fact that raising a bilingual child is a lot of hard work for everyone involved, so it’s vital to make the experience enjoyable, too—to whatever degree you can. It’s an odd balance, but I think it’s important to be both very serious and very playful at the same time: serious about the process and yet playful when it comes to carrying that process out. Half of this is simply attitude, but the other half involves implementing activities (books, stories, riddles, games, etc.) that can nurture language development in a lighthearted way.

11. Clone yourself

When your children are small, and are especially in need of exposure to the minority

language, it can be frustrating when you serve as the main source of that exposure yet are unable to spend as much time with them as you'd like, due to work or other factors. One way to address this lack of input—and, again, have fun in the process—is to create videos of yourself reading picture books, telling stories, singing songs and talking to your children. I did this when my kids were younger and asked my wife to play these videos every day for about 30 minutes. The videos captivated them (and amazed them when I happened to be in the same room!), while adding many hours of targeted language exposure over those years. (See [The Busy Parent's Guide to Cloning Yourself](#) for all the details.)

12. Read aloud every day

Reading aloud to your child in the minority language, for at least 15 minutes each day, is a vital practice when it comes to nurturing good bilingual ability. It may seem too simple, but reading aloud regularly has an enormous impact on a child's language development as well as his interest in books and literacy. If you don't read aloud—preferably from day one and continuing for as long as you possibly can—it will be far more difficult for your child to develop strong proficiency in the minority language. (For more on the importance of reading aloud to children, see [The Secret to Raising a Bilingual Child](#).)

13. Turn to chapter books

As soon as your children reach a suitable age and language level, I highly recommend reading aloud chapter books that come in a series to help get them hooked on books. Do this daily and chapter books will quickly cast a spell and whet their appetite for literacy. And if reading regularly in person is difficult, try “cloning yourself” on video and have your spouse play a chapter or two each day. (See [How to Get Your Child Hooked on Books](#) for a list of good series in English.)

14. Build a home library

You can't read aloud to your child regularly if you don't have suitable books in the minority language, including chapter books that come in series of 5 or 15 or even 25+ books. The costs can add up quickly, I know, but in the long run, books are a small investment, really, when the eventual payoff in good language ability is so great. Cut back in other areas of your budget, if you must, but don't scrimp when it comes to putting children's books in your home.

15. Give books as gifts

By making a practice of giving books in the minority language as gifts for birthdays, Christmas, and other special occasions—and encouraging family and friends to do the same for your kids—you achieve three important things: 1) You help foster their love of books and literacy; 2) You convey the idea that books are special and valued by their loved ones (including Santa); and 3) You continue growing your home library, which should be an ongoing effort.

16. Visit the public library

This will naturally depend on your location and target language, but perhaps the public library in your area has a selection of picture books that you can access for free—it can't hurt to investigate. Here in Hiroshima, the children's library has a fairly large collection of books in such languages as English, Chinese, Korean, French, German and Russian. Maybe your local library has books in minority languages, too, or would be willing to acquire some.

17. Employ “captive reading”

To encourage literacy development and reading practice in the target language, you can take advantage of the phenomenon I call “captive reading”: the natural tendency to read any words that fall under our gaze. Put posters of the writing system and common words on the wall; label things in the house; include notes in your child’s lunchbox; put up a small whiteboard in the bathroom and write little messages and riddles on it; later on, post short stories in the bathroom, too, like fairy tales and fables.

18. Write “serial stories”

Another version of “captive reading” makes use of “serial stories.” These are particularly fun and motivating for children who already have some reading ability in the minority language. In my case, I write one page every other day or so (with a cliffhanger ending) for a running storyline that features my own children as the main characters. I then post them, page by page, on the inside of the bathroom door. (The older pages are transferred to the wall.) The roughly ten-part stories are very silly—I’m basically just typing out what pops into my head—but my kids find them funny and are continually pestering me to produce the next installment. (For step-by-step instructions, see [Turn Your Kids into Eager Readers with This Fun, Simple Strategy.](#))

19. Use background music

Making use of music in the minority language is an easy and effective way to consistently add to the language exposure your child receives. This is no substitute for your active involvement, of course, but background music can be one more beneficial component of your overall efforts. Just put a CD player and suitable CDs in the child’s main play space and play this music regularly. If your kids are anything like mine, they’ll probably soon start singing along!

20. Play games together

Games in the minority language—like board games and card games—are another resource to gather for your home. Children love to play games, and there are no doubt good games available in your target language that would be fun to play and are effective in promoting language exposure. (You can also consider games published in other languages that don’t rely on reading, since these can be played in any language as long as you know the rules!) For a more harmonious home, I would recommend balancing the usual “competitive games” (which can leave kids in tears) with “cooperative games” (where the players work as a team).

21. Make your home “language-rich”

Beyond books, music, and games, make your home as rich in exposure to the minority language as you can. At the same time, try to inhibit, to whatever degree makes sense for your family, the prevailing influence of the majority language. For example, when it comes to electronic toys, a device in the minority language would probably be a more productive choice than a gadget in the majority language. In the same way, emphasize TV shows and DVDs in the minority language, too.

22. Fuel natural passions

Make an effort to fuel your child’s passions via resources and opportunities in the minority language. If your son loves super heroes, or your daughter loves horses, seek out suitable books or DVDs on these subjects in the target language. In this way you’ll be nurturing their natural passions and language ability at the same time. Depending on where you live, you

might also have access to opportunities in the minority language—like classes, clubs or other activities—that connect to a child’s special interests.

23. Engage in storytelling

Tell your children true stories from your childhood—kids love to hear about the (mis)adventures of their parents when they were young. You can also invent fantastical “made-up memories” from your past or your children’s early years. (Kids like telling “made-up memories,” too.) The point is, storytelling—whether fact or fiction—can help expand and enrich the conversations you have with your children, and are especially suited for mealtimes.

24. Give written homework

If fostering good reading and writing ability in the minority language is important to you, it’s best to establish a habit of homework early. If you begin giving small daily doses of homework at the age of three or four—starting, for example, with simple dot-to-dot books or other light activity books—this can set a positive pattern for the rest of their childhood. Make daily homework like teeth-brushing—an expected habit—and it can be maintained far more easily than if you try to impose it later on. As with children’s literature, you must make efforts to seek out suitable materials on a regular basis.

25. Find a pen-pal

For a child, there may be no better way to promote the written word than through a pen-pal relationship. Over the past several years my daughter has been exchanging letters with a girl in the United States. They write to each other (with some support from the parents) about every other month and send gifts for birthdays and for Christmas. Hopefully, we can maintain this connection for some time to come, but even so, the experience has already benefited her growing writing ability and her grasp of the value of her language skill.

26. Deepen that feeling of value

To deepen a child’s feeling for the value of his minority language—thus positively impacting his attitude and motivation—that value must be experienced directly through interactions with other speakers of the language. Locally, you could pursue play dates with other children, get-togethers with family or friends (in person or via online chats) and homestay guests who speak the target language. Of course, if you have the opportunity, taking trips to places where the minority language is actually the majority language—even placing the child in a school setting in such locations for a period of time—could be ideal, both for grasping the value of the language and gaining stronger overall proficiency.

27. Use the language to help others

As important as it is to deepen the child’s feeling for the value of his language skill through interactions with other speakers of the language, I have found an additional way of promoting this sense of value that may be even more powerful: **create opportunities where the child can help others by using his minority language ability.** For instance, my daughter and I sometimes volunteer to help people who are themselves learners of the minority language. Through these experiences, she has come to realize that her language ability is not only useful to herself, it’s helpful to others, and this seems to be an even deeper, richer source of motivation.

28. Use “carrots” and “sticks”

There are various views when it comes to giving rewards, but I’ve found that a reasonable use of “carrots” has provided an effective framework for nudging my children to read books

and do daily homework. In our case, when they finish reading a book, they earn a little prize—something that genuinely excites them. My son, for instance, likes plastic Pokemon characters and this small reward has heightened his enthusiasm for reading. As for daily homework, it may sound funny, but they're quite content with a piece of (sugarless) gum after their tasks are complete. And the only "stick" I seem to need (at least so far) is the reminder that they can watch no TV until all their work is finished.

29. Give time and attention

Our children will be little only once, and even then, for barely a blink. Whatever your circumstance, do all that you can to give time and attention to your kids while they're small. Not only do they need the language support that you can provide, they need, above all, your love. It isn't always easy to stop in the middle of something when your child interrupts, or answer yet another curious question without irritation, but it's worth making the effort—every time—in order to promote your child's bilingual ability and deepen the bond between you as parent and child.

BONUS TIP: Keep a journal

This last tip isn't strictly about bilingual development, but I think it's worth sharing. If you aren't keeping a journal on your kids, you might want to start. It's a small investment of your time, really—just make a short entry in a notebook or text file every few weeks—but for your children, these observations of their language milestones, their early traits and interests, and their notable activities and experiences will one day be a priceless peek into the childhood that they will have largely forgotten.

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