

■ GOOD SCHOOLS GUIDE ■

MULTILINGUAL LEARNING

HOW TO RAISE A POLYGLOT

Fostering multilingualism at home can bring an array of developmental benefits for children. Experts tell **Jacqueline Kot** what parents can do to help



Many parents aspire to raise multilingual children, whether for cultural reasons or for the potential benefits in their later studies or career. There is no shortage of research to support the benefits of learning multiple languages as a child.

The Raising Children Network, a parenting website supported by the Australian government, highlights the wide-ranging benefits of multilingualism in childhood. These include giving children a leg up with literacy skills and other academic subjects, and paving the way for more enriching work and travel opportunities when they are older. From a civic perspective, encouraging multilingualism in young children means that more people in the community will be appreciative and knowledgeable about different cultures. If a child is from a multilingual family, the benefits for their personal development include strengthening their sense of self-worth and identity – given that they have a better understanding of their heritage, and can communicate more easily with all of their family members.



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NICK STAFFA, CANADIAN INTERNATIONAL SCHOOL OF HONG KONG

"There is a lot of research around the benefits of multilingualism, but for me, at the end of the day, it's about nurturing kids to be the best and happiest they can be," says Nick Staffa, lower school vice principal at the Canadian International School of Hong Kong.

"I don't think any parent would be against something for their child that is scientifically proven to enhance academic performance, cognitive skills, focus, task management, executive functioning, memory and decision making.

"Multilingual students also gain more awareness of other cultures and perspectives; health benefits, such as a reduced chance of dementia later in life; and potentially higher earnings as adults, leveraging their language skills," he continues.

Tina Tian, an ESF adviser for Chinese, first came to Hong Kong 14 years ago, and arrived speaking Mandarin and English. She quickly came to the conclusion that she needed to learn Cantonese as well to thrive in the city. "Looking back, that experience of learning Cantonese as

Reading to your child in all the languages they're exposed to at home is a great way to reinforce their learning.

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an adult has greatly informed my approach to teaching languages. I've seen first-hand how malleable and adaptable young minds can be when it comes to picking up new languages," Tian says. "As the saying goes, speaking a person's language 'goes to their heart', enabling deeper connections. Bilingual and multilingual children demonstrate enhanced cognitive abilities, such as improved problem solving, flexibility and memory."

However, much like getting children to eat their vegetables and spend less time on their screens, nurturing multilingualism can require time, dedication and patience on the part of parents.

Maintaining consistency is key

"The key is to take a multifaceted approach that builds consistent exposure, active engagement and positive reinforcement for the child's multilingual development," says Tian. "Patience and consistency from parents are critical when it comes to nurturing a child's ability to master multiple languages from an early age."

Tian suggests encouraging children to listen to podcasts and audiobooks in the secondary language that they are speaking in home, in addition to English. She also advises parents to dedicate an equal amount of time to fostering reading and writing skills in both languages – such as by getting children to journal in both languages, instead of just one.

Use all forms of media

"There are so many ways that parents can encourage multilingualism at home," says Staffa. "Using environmental print is one. That is the print we see around us all the time. You can make games or talk about things, such as signs, labels, logos, wrappers, number plates, etc. These are all around us – especially in Hong Kong, where so many things are in both English and Chinese."

Another method, he suggests, is to watch the same cartoons and other shows that your child likes in another language. "One thing I love about TV in Hong Kong is that you can toggle between different languages," Staffa says. In addition, streaming platforms like Netflix make it easy for parents to play shows in a different language.

Reading to your child is an important activity regardless, and one that comes with its own long list of benefits. Parents can level up by making sure to include all languages spoken at home in their child's routine.

"A third tip is to ensure you take the time to read to your child in all the languages of the household. Spending time together with a parent reading books is very important for children, and this can be in any language," says Staffa.

If one parent isn't as proficient in the secondary language spoken at home, or if both parents want to encourage their child to learn a language they haven't mastered, Staffa says there are ways around it.

"There are apps [you can use], along with audiobooks for reading aloud to you and your child," he says. "It's mainly about the time together and the importance you place on language learning as a family."

Model good language skills

Staffa has noticed throughout his career that some parents feel that they must speak the language that their child is exposed to at school, such as English, even if it is not their strongest language. This can have a negative effect on their child's language skills, however.

"Some parents think they must use the language their child is learning in at school at home, but it's best for parents to speak languages they're fluent in, perhaps their native language or one they speak very well," he says. "Speaking to your child in a language you don't know well yourself models language that's not fully developed and can [actually] delay your child's language development."

Multiple languages are not confusing

Tian says there are some common misconceptions around exposing children to multiple languages in the home environment. "Firstly, some parents believe that exposing children to more than one language will be confusing for them, so they opt to use only a single language," she says, adding that research has shown that children can successfully acquire multiple languages from birth without this negatively impacting their language development.

Again, maintaining consistency is key, with Tian suggesting a "one parent, one language" approach, whereby each parent speaks a different language exclusively to the child. "While this method does require time, effort and consistency, it has proven to be an effective way to ensure children receive ample exposure to both languages."

Tian adds that another misconception is around the role, or importance, of the home or "mother tongue" language of the parents. "Studies have shown that a strong foundation in the mother tongue or home language during the early years can significantly benefit children's acquisition of additional languages," she says. "A robust home language provides important critical thinking skills and learning concepts that enable children to more easily transition to learning other languages at a later stage."



"Children are not hindered by learning multiple languages – quite the opposite," says Staffa. "They construct meaning and make connections through languages as they lay down multiple pathways in the brain – more so than monolingual learners."

Staffa says that children who are learning more than one language might take longer in the beginning to develop their language skills. "But they surpass monolingual learners through the benefits of multilingualism – as evidenced on standardised tests and other assessments," he says. "I liken it to a craftsman with a toolbox filled with additional and more efficient tools to outperform others who only have a hammer and a screwdriver for building the same thing."

An alternative to Pinyin, Zhuyin is a phonetic system for learning Mandarin as a second language. Photo: Handout



Reading your child's favourite books in more than one language is a fun way to build new vocabulary in the secondary language. Photo: Handout



A rewarding but often challenging endeavour, nurturing multilingualism in early childhood requires time, dedication and patience on the part of parents. Photo: Shutterstock