



# Developing bilingualism in children

Advice for health and childcare  
professionals in Wales

Two languages - twice the choice



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# 1 Introduction

This booklet is for midwives, health visitors, teachers, playgroup leaders, doctors, speech therapists, psychologists and counsellors - in short anyone who is concerned with the development of young children. It aims to provide information and advice about bilingualism in Wales, the advantages to children of being bilingual from an early age, and the various strategies which families can adopt to help their children become bilingual.

## 1.1 Speaking two languages

Bringing up children to be bilingual is an important decision. It will affect the rest of their lives and the lives of their parents.

There are many advantages to children of being bilingual, for example:

- The ability to think more flexibly and creatively
- Being able to communicate with a wider variety of people than a person who can speak only one language
- The opportunity to enjoy two different cultures
- Helping to feel a part of Wales, a sense of belonging
- Helping to build a bridge between generations, if grandparents and other family members speak Welsh
- Definite economic advantages later on when children are job seeking.

But deciding to conduct family life in two languages, especially when either the mother or father can't speak Welsh, can feel like a big step to take, and parents may want to take advice from professionals.

It's worth remembering that bilingualism is much more commonplace elsewhere in Europe than it is here in Britain. There are at least 100 minority languages in Europe. Millions of people are bilingual or multilingual. The situation in Wales is therefore by no means unusual. Other examples are Breton and Occitain speakers in France, Basque and Catalan speakers in Spain, and Irish speakers in Ireland, to name just a few.

It is estimated that between 60 and 65% of people in the world use at least two languages in their everyday lives, and around 50 million people in Europe use a language every day that's different from the official language of the country in which they live.

## 1.2 Children and language

Children are born with the equipment to run and play, to laugh and to learn. They are also born with the ability to become bilingual and multilingual. There is more than enough room in the brain for two or more languages.

Language is about communication. We need language to communicate information, to build relationships, to play games and tell stories, to make new friends and work in groups. In this context, correctness of grammar, accuracy of vocabulary, skilled interpreting and translating are not important. The most important factor in the language development of a bilingual child is nothing to do with the languages themselves. It is about making the experience enjoyable for children.



## 2 Frequently-asked questions

### 2.1 What is bilingualism?

Bilingualism means being able to conduct aspects of everyday life in two languages. In between those who are totally fluent in two languages and those who are learning a second language there are many variations - indeed it is almost impossible to say exactly when someone stops being a 'learner' and becomes 'bilingual'.

Some people become equally fluent in both their languages. However, most people who are bilingual are more at home in one language than another. Very often the two languages are used in different circumstances, for example:

- with the family
- in the local community
- at work
- in church, chapel or other social contexts.

Fluency in one or other language may also vary according to how much use is made of that language.

#### Bilingualism in different types of homes/families:

Things like:

- the language abilities of mother and father
  - the availability of language practice with the extended family
  - the nature of the local language community
  - the attitudes of the family and other people to the languages
- create a wide variety of bilingual families.

Different languages may be used with the mother, father, brothers, sisters, the extended family and local community.

### Top tips!

Language development is encouraged by such things as:

- asking the child interesting questions
- asking the child to tell a story rather than always listen
- singing nursery rhymes and songs together
- playing language games and finger rhymes
- using role play (e.g. playing doctors and nurses, puppets, cops and robbers)
- making sure adult-child conversations are child oriented.

Show delight at small steps forward in bilingual development.

Praise the child for speaking two languages, especially in front of other adults, grandparents for example.

The occasional quiet 'well done', wink or smile works wonders.

Appropriate praise will provide the child with encouragement and a helpful family atmosphere for the development of bilingualism.

## 2.2 How can we make sure conversations are child oriented?

Make sure they:

- are not too complex
- expand a child's attempts to communicate (e.g. 'me go' 'Yes, it's time we went to the park')
- contain plenty of open questions (i.e. questions where there are several possible answers rather than a simple right and wrong answer)
- include plenty of encouragement and approval for the child's language attempts
- value and encourage the child's contribution
- are attentive to the child i.e. the parent is a good listener
- take every opportunity to connect words with objects to convey meaning and help to remember them
- include plenty of hand gestures and body language.

## 2.3 Is it easier to become bilingual as a young child?

In many ways, yes it is. Young children pick up language very easily, as a by-product of playing and interacting with people. They are not worried by their language mistakes, nor about not finding the exact words. They are mainly interested in getting their message across and getting answers.

When children are very young, they pick up accurate pronunciation quickly. Children can easily learn the distinct sounds of two languages and local dialects. This is very different from adults, who can find things like rolling the 'r' and mastering unfamiliar guttural and nasal sounds difficult. Even when adults become perfectly fluent in a second language, their pronunciation often still carries the ring of the first language.

For these reasons, if the home situation allows it, it is very beneficial to develop bilingualism in children sooner rather than later. **The best current advice is to start as early as possible, ideally as soon as the child is born!**

However, if the family situation doesn't allow for this, all is not lost! There are many support systems available, as described later, which can help parents who wish to do so to assist their children to become bilingual from a very early age.

## 2.4 How quickly do children become bilingual?

Just as some children learn to crawl, walk or say their first words earlier than others, so the speed of language development varies between children.

There is no simple reason why some children are quicker than others in developing two languages or find it easier to become bilingual. Each child is different. Factors like:

- the child's personality
  - ability and aptitude for language learning
  - social development
  - the quality and quantity of interaction with parents and other children, neighbours and extended family
  - the attitudes of other people around the family
  - the child's own attitudes towards bilingualism
- all affect the rate at which this happens.



## 2.5 Is the child likely to be equally fluent in two languages?

Probably not. It is unrealistic to expect a bilingual child to be perfectly fluent in both languages, since they normally use their two languages in different circumstances and with different people. For example:

- Children's religious vocabulary may be strong in one language and not in the other if they attend church or chapel in one language only.
- The child is likely to be strong in scientific vocabulary in one language only, having been taught science in that language.

The two languages are therefore mostly different tools for different jobs. However, there will be transfer in thinking from one language to another (e.g. in religious ideas and scientific concepts). If a child is taught mathematical multiplication and division in one language, those skills do not have to be retaught in the second language. They immediately transfer as an idea and an understanding into another language (so long as the child has the vocabulary to use it in that second language).

Most bilinguals are stronger in one language than another. For example, if one language is used much of the time, and the person has been educated in that language, he or she may have a wider vocabulary and more complex grammatical structure than in the second language. However, this other, 'weaker', language may be the one that is naturally used at home or with grandparents. That family language is developed to meet the needs of home life and is thoroughly effective for that situation.

The relationship between the two languages is also likely to change over time. As children and adults

- move house
- move school
- move jobs
- go for long or short trips abroad
- make friends
- develop new interests

so the balance and strength of the languages change. Children who were able to understand but not speak a second language, often quickly become speakers, readers and writers when moving to a region which demands use of that language.

## 2.6 Will learning Welsh interfere with the development of English?

Definitely not. Although mixing words from the two languages often occurs among young children, they very quickly learn to separate them. Generally, research suggests that the effects of being bilingual are positive in terms of language development as a whole, including the first language. For example, when learning two languages at the same time, the child becomes more aware of language itself. Having two (or more) words for each object, idea or concept will expand rather than contract the mind.

## 3 Family language strategies

### 3.1 Bringing up bilingual children

A variety of successful language strategies can be used by parents when bringing up bilingual children. The strategy chosen needs to include a consideration of both the **quantity** and the **quality** of exposure to each language.

#### Quantity

A child who hears one language for half an hour a day, particularly at the end of the day when she or he is tired, is unlikely to grow competent in that language. To give a realistic chance of achieving bilingualism, it is necessary to plan and introduce a variety of experiences in both languages. These experiences can include books, cassettes, visits to the park etc.

#### Quality

The quality of language use is important, and different from quantity. In some homes, there is a lack of communication between parents and children. There is also the other extreme. Some parents bombard their children with a never ending stream of language. The child hears plenty of the language but is not encouraged to speak it.

### 3.2 Possible strategies

The three main strategies are as follows, although other alternatives are possible and patterns may well change over time, but those described below are all commonly used:

**Strategy 1:** Each parent speaks a different language to the child. This 'one person-one language' strategy is usually successful in helping the child to become bilingual with ease.

**Strategy 2:** The parents speak one language to the child who acquires a second language outside the home. In Wales, this refers to both children who acquire Welsh at home and English at school and socially outside the home, and children who learn Welsh at school and come from an English-speaking home. This is also a successful route to children becoming bilingual.

**Strategy 3:** Both parents speak both languages to the child, switching languages according to situations.

Family life is not always sufficiently simple to make language separation easy. In the one person - one language situation, there is the issue of which language the family speaks when together, for example at mealtimes.

### 3.2 Family conversations in Welsh when guests are present:

Where both parents speak Welsh to their children, there are occasions when visitors, strangers, guests and friends who do not speak Welsh visit the home. The question for parents is what language to speak to their children when visitors are present. Do the parents stick to Welsh or do they switch to English so as not to exclude the visitors? If all members of the family temporarily switch to



the visitor's language, it is possible to signal to the child that this is an occasion where social etiquette requires a switch in family language. Children are usually very quick at catching on which language to speak to whom in which situation. There is no simple answer about what to do in abnormal situations. Answers will naturally vary from family to family. However, some guidelines are possible. It is desirable for parents to discuss the general situations that occur most often. They can plan ahead the language that will be used with strangers and with each other. An understanding in the family will give language strength to that family and provide a common and stable base for the children.

### 3.4 Keeping the two languages separate

Experts on bilingualism have traditionally recommended keeping bilingual children's language experience separate in the early stages. This happens quite naturally when one parent speaks one language and the other parent speaks a different language to the child. There is a clear division when listening to those two languages which makes it easy for the child to recognise which language to speak to which parent.

Although some mixing of languages is natural, the older the child grows, if the languages are kept separate bilingual development will be very efficient.

However, there are families who mix languages and the child still learns to separate the languages, although sometimes a little later. When both parents are fluent in two languages, they may chop and change between the two when speaking to each other. In such families, children may consistently speak both languages with both parents, but show no signs of being confused. The truth is that there is no 'right' answer. Each family must work out a strategy that works for their particular situation.

### 3.5 A child mixing two languages

There are very few bilingual families where the child does not mix the two languages, at the very least in the early stages. From the child's point of view, language mixing helps the message to be communicated and its meaning understood. However, many parents see mixing languages as a problem.

Whether or not a child mixes two languages may be affected by differing factors such as:

- who the child hears speaking which language
- the balance of the two languages in the child's home and community life
- the quantity of language experience in both languages
- the quality of language experience
- parents' acceptance (or not) of mixing the two languages
- the experience of using the two languages in the community.

Parents can help in this process of language separation by adopting some useful guidelines. The most important 'don't' is to avoid criticising, or constantly pointing out mistakes. This is likely to have a negative effect on a child's language development, making the child inhibited and anxious about practising his or her new skills.

### 3.6 A child using two languages with the same parent

A typical family situation is a child moving away from the language boundaries that have been established. A child may decide to speak English to the mother despite previously speaking to her in Welsh from birth. Tactics are possible to try to keep to the parent's desired strategy without alienating the child and making him or her resent the language. One way is to encourage the child to repeat the message in the other language :

*Mae'n ddrwg gen i. Be 'wedest ti? ('I'm sorry. What did you say?')*

*Dwed wrtha i eto yn Gymraeg wnei di? Wnes i ddim deall yn iawn'*  
(Tell me again in Welsh, will you? I didn't quite understand')

*'Wyt ti'n meindio dweud hwnna eto yn Gymraeg?'*  
(Do you mind repeating that in Welsh please?)

Even when the child persists in answering in English, the parent continues to use only Welsh. The message will eventually get through!

### 3.7 A parent learning a second language alongside a child

This is not as unusual as it sounds. There are many examples of a parent learning a language from the other parent alongside their child. For example, a father may pick up Welsh from the mother while listening to the mother speaking Welsh to the child. The father will be able to understand basic Welsh conversations in the family, but will continue to speak in English. Although he is perfectly happy for the rest of the family to use Welsh, he would find it artificial and unnatural to speak to the child in anything except his first language.

In other cases, a parent will attend a Welsh language learning class, in order to establish a language pattern in the house so that all the family can at least understand each other speaking.

The reality is that it is very difficult for most mothers (and fathers) to speak to their child in anything other than their own first language. It feels restrictive and frustrating. There is a wealth of colloquial sayings, family stories, local jokes and colourful tales, all stored in the memory, which can only be properly conveyed in the first or 'mother' tongue. In this situation, the parents should use whichever language feels most natural to them, and find another way of introducing the second language, through a Welsh-medium playgroup or any of the other support materials suggested below.

### 3.8 Homes where nobody speaks Welsh

If parents are eager for their children to become bilingual, there are successful ways of achieving this goal in Wales even when there is no Welsh spoken in the home or the family. Young children can pick up Welsh

- at a nursery school
- at a playgroup
- with a childminder.

If that experience is followed by attending Welsh-medium school, the child can become very successfully bilingual.



Children can also be successful in acquiring Welsh painlessly and effortlessly in some areas of Wales through playing with friends over successive years in the evening, during holidays and at weekends.

Parents' attitudes, encouragement and interest are vital to a child's second language development. Praising the child when they hear the child speaking Welsh is a simple way of showing encouragement. Visiting the Welsh nursery school and showing interest in the language development of the child there will both encourage the teacher and show the child that the parent is interested and enthusiastic. Welsh language support may also be provided by English-speaking parents in the form of cassettes, videos, books, posters and games.

### 3.9 Developing bilingual skills further

The child ideally needs to develop from listening and speaking Welsh to being able to read and write the language as well. Parents can encourage this in two ways. They can provide stimulating material in Welsh - books and magazines. Also, they can listen to the child reading in Welsh even if they are 'encouragers' rather than 'correctors'. Research has shown that even if a parent doesn't understand what the child is reading, the child engaging in reading practice plus the visible encouragement and interest of the parent helps the development of reading in the second language. Mudiad Ysgolion Meithrin (the national association of Welsh-medium playgroups) organises a scheme called Cynllun Cymraeg i'r Teulu (Welsh for the Family), which helps non-Welsh speaking parents to read books in Welsh with their child.

## 4 Education and bilingualism

### 4.1 Should a child go to a bilingual school?

Generally, education through Welsh for a Welsh-speaking child is the best option as that child tends to be more successful in the curriculum, for a variety of reasons.

If the school supports the child's minority language, it is supporting the child's home, family and heritage. School is therefore helping to build the child's self-esteem and sense of self-confidence. International research supports this theory, as it tends to show that minority language children succeed better when educated through their minority language. Such children still become fully bilingual and biliterate, because a good bilingual school will ensure that children can operate fluently and effectively in either language. They will therefore be developing valuable skills for the future in the world of employment.

In Wales, an increasing number of English-speaking parents opt to send their children to Welsh-medium primary and secondary schools. Particularly when such children start their education in Welsh at age four or five, their English language competence and curriculum performance does not suffer. Instead, they add a second language and culture without cost to their home language. Achievement in a variety of subjects can be increased for bilinguals (see below).

### 4.2 The positive effects of learning through the medium of two languages

The bilingual has the advantage of being able to operate in two languages. Research shows that there may be small performance advantages among 'balanced' or well developed bilinguals in school. Those children who can work in either language in the curriculum may show a marginally improved performance in the curriculum. If a child is steeped in the two cultures attached to the languages, for example, there may be more width of understanding and appreciation that can enhance performance in subjects such as history, geography, social studies, the creative arts and science.

### 4.3 Does learning through Welsh affect a child's development in English?

No! Children who learn through the minority language (Welsh) usually pick up the majority language (English) very easily. There are two main reasons for this. Firstly, what a child learns in one language can easily be transferred into a second language. The child who learns in Welsh about evaporation in the environment, the life cycle of an amoeba, or military strategies in history does not have to relearn those things in English. So long as the child has the vocabulary in English, what is learned at school is usable in that language as well.



Secondly, the child is bombarded with English-language experiences in all areas of everyday life in Wales. On breakfast cereal packets, television, computer games, pop music cassettes and CDs, street signs and posters, newspapers and magazines, comics and catalogues, English is everywhere. Also, most children are exposed to English in the playground and in the local community. Often, English is the common denominator language to such an extent that Welsh speakers are expected to switch into English even when only one person is present who cannot understand Welsh.

Out-of-school experiences are therefore obviously helping children develop competence in the majority language. If the school is then mostly reinforcing the minority language, children can become bilingual with ease.

## 5 The advantages of a child becoming bilingual

### 5.1 Thinking benefits

#### i Creative thinking

Bilingual children have two or more words for each object and idea. Sometimes corresponding words in different languages have different connotations. When slightly different associations are attached to each word, the bilingual may be able to think with more flexibility and versatility.

Consider this simple question: How many uses can you think of for a brick?

Some children give two or three answers only:

- building walls
  - building a house
- and perhaps that is all.

Another child scribbles away, pouring out ideas one after the other:

- blocking up a rabbit hole
- breaking a window
- a bird bath
- a plumb line
- an abstract sculpture.

Research in different parts of the world shows that bilinguals tend to be more fluent in their answers to this type of open-ended question. A child may have different associations for the word 'brick' in each language. Having more than one word for a concept may give the bilingual more than one meaning for that concept. For example, a Welsh/English bilingual has the word 'school' and its Welsh equivalent 'ysgol'. 'Ysgol' also means 'ladder'. The idea of school is thus extended to an image of climbing through education with the aim of getting to the top rung.

#### ii Sensitivity in communication

Bilinguals have to know which language to use with which person in which situation. They therefore appear to be more sensitive to the needs of listeners than monolinguals.

#### iii IQ Tests

Research from many different countries of the world shows that bilinguals tend to be ahead on IQ tests compared with similar (same gender, social class and age) monolinguals. Far from making people mentally confused, bilingualism is now associated with a modest degree of intellectual superiority.

#### iv Word-Concept looseness

Being less fixed on the sound of words and more centred on the meaning of words has been shown by Canadian researchers to give a head start in learning to read. The ability to move away from the sound of words and to fix on the meaning of words tends to be a significant advantage for bilinguals around the ages four to six. This advantage tends to mean a greater readiness in learning to read (and in learning to think about language itself).

If young children are asked: which is more like the word 'cap'; 'cat' or 'hat'?, there is a tendency for bilinguals to centre more on similarity of meaning (i.e. the word 'hat') than similarity of sound (i.e. the word 'cat').



## 5.2 Increased curriculum achievement

Research evidence from Canadian, United States, Basque, Catalan and Welsh bilingual education reveals that children who operate in two languages in the curriculum tend to show better performance in tests and examinations. This is probably related to the thinking advantages of bilingualism mentioned above. For example, bilinguals tend to be more creative in their thinking which aids their performance in a variety of curriculum areas.

## 5.3 Easier to learn a third language

There is a growing European research tradition showing that bilinguals tend to be more attuned to languages, more linguistically prepared to learn a third language. The current best examples are children from countries such as Holland, Denmark and Finland who often speak three, four or five languages with ease (e.g. Dutch, German, English; or Finnish, Swedish, English and German). Another example is the Basque country where learning Basque, Spanish and English has become increasingly frequent.

## 5.4 Economic and employment benefits

There are potential economic advantages in Wales (which are continually increasing) of being bilingual. A person with two languages will probably have a wider portfolio of jobs available in the future. Bilinguals are increasingly needed in the retail sector, tourism, transport, public relations, banking and accountancy, administration, translation, secretarial work, marketing and sales, the law and teaching. Bilinguals can offer potential employers more flexibility.

In Wales, fluency in Welsh in particular geographical areas is required to obtain teaching and administrative posts, and is of prime value in business and commerce. Bilingualism obviously does not guarantee a meal ticket but it often gives a competitive advantage and opens up more possibilities.

## 5.5 Wider communication

Where parents have differing first languages, the advantage of children becoming bilingual is that they will be able to communicate in each parent's preferred language. This can allow a close and special relationship with each parent to develop.

For most mothers and fathers, it is important for them to be able to speak to the child in their first language, which allows each parent to communicate more naturally. At the same time, both parents are passing to that child part of their past and of their family's heritage.

Being a bilingual also allows someone to bridge between generations, with grandparents, for example, or with other family members. This helps to build a sense of belonging to, and connection with, the extended family.

## 5.6 Twice the enjoyment of reading and writing

If someone can read and write in two languages, as well as speak and understand them, they are obviously able to enjoy two literatures, opening up different traditions, ideas, ways of thinking and behaving. The pleasures of reading novels and magazines and the enjoyment of writing to friends and family are all doubled for bilinguals.

## 5.7 Access to two cultures, and two worlds of experience

One of the advantages of a bilingual person is having two or more worlds of experience and culture. Speaking a language to a child conveys culture to that child, including idioms and sayings, folk stories and history.

## 5.8 Greater tolerance of other languages and other cultures

With two languages goes a wider cultural experience, and often a greater tolerance of cultural difference. A bilingual person typically accepts and is more welcoming of those who speak other languages and have different cultures, creeds and customs.

## 5.9 Raising self-esteem

In the past children were not permitted to speak Welsh in the classroom and playground. In this situation, Welsh was a 'disadvantage'. By rejecting the language of the home the child was led to believe that the culture and values of the parents, extended family and community were also rejected.

By today, a bilingual child can move more freely between languages and cultures. Recognition of Welsh and English as completely equal languages in Wales contributes to the development of a bilingual child's self-worth and self-esteem.

## 5.10 Security in identity

Where Welsh is a frequent language of communication, acquiring Welsh language and culture is a contributor to family, extended family, school, peer group and local or community identity. The Welsh language becomes a means of relaying and sharing identity, a badge of belonging to Wales and a link between all Welsh people. Everyone in Wales and from Wales can be proud of the language, even if they don't speak it. It belongs to us all.



## 6 Finding out more information about bilingualism

Parents are particularly encouraged to read the *Bilingual Family Newsletter*. This provides an up-to-date and valuable source of information for parents, containing a combination of advice from experts, experiences of parents, information about networks of people, inter-cultural experiences, bilingual humour, Internet addresses and reviews of the latest publications. Contact: Marjukka Grover, Multilingual Matters Limited, at the address shown below.

The following titles will provide more detailed information on points raised in this booklet.

- (1) Colin Baker *A Parents and Teachers Guide to Bilingualism and Bilingual Education* (Multilingual Matters Limited, First edition 1995; Second edition 1999).
- (2) Edith Harding and Philip Riley *The Bilingual Family: A Handbook for Parents* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986).
- (3) An up-to-date list of information for parents will be found in the most recent Multilingual Matters catalogue, available free of charge from the address shown below.

### Useful contacts

#### **Mudiad Ysgolion Meithrin**

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