Frequently Asked Questions

adapted from *Bilingualism Matters* website (<http://www.bilingualism-matters.ppls.ed.ac.uk/faq/> last accessed 10.11.14)

* [Why want bilingual children?](http://www.bilingualism-matters.ppls.ed.ac.uk/faq/bilingual-children/)

There are many reasons, but the two most common are:

* The parents speak different languages (say, an American woman and a Turkish man).
* The parents speak the same language, but live in a community where most people speak something else (say, a Korean couple living in the UK).

In the first case, both the mother and father may want to be able to use their own language when talking to their children. This is the bilingual home situation. In the second, the parents may want to be able to use their own language at home even though their children also need to function in the world outside the front door. This is the bilingual setting situation.

* [Don’t children get confused when they hear two languages spoken around them?](http://www.bilingualism-matters.ppls.ed.ac.uk/faq/children-confused/)

The short answer is no. Children are incredibly sensitive to the different ways people speak. Even when they only hear one language, they learn very quickly about differences between the way men and women talk, the difference between polite and impolite ways of talking, and so on. For children, the bilingual situation is just a matter of another difference between people!

Fifty years ago educators throughout North America used to tell immigrant parents that it was better for their children’s schooling if they spoke English at home. Some researchers thought that early exposure to two languages put children at a disadvantage. Newer research tells us that this is not so, and there may be advantages to being bilingual (in addition to knowing more than one language), such as more flexible thinking. The disadvantages that earlier research found were generally economic disadvantages, linked to the hardships of immigrants’ lives.

* [Don’t bilingual children ever mix their languages up?](http://www.bilingualism-matters.ppls.ed.ac.uk/faq/mix-languages/)

Like adult bilinguals, bilingual children often use words from one language when speaking the other. (This is called code-switching.) But this doesn’t mean they are confused about which language they are speaking.

* [So how do we start teaching our children two languages?](http://www.bilingualism-matters.ppls.ed.ac.uk/faq/start-teaching/)

The main thing to keep in mind is that parents don’t really ‘teach’ children to speak, any more than they teach them to walk or smile. The most important things in language development are exposure and need. If children are exposed to a language in a variety of circumstances with many different people from the time they are born, and if they feel they need the language to interact with the world around them, they will learn it. If they are exposed to two languages in varied circumstances with different people from the moment they are born, and if they need both languages to communicate with the people around them, they will learn both.

* [Do you really mean that if our children are exposed to two languages from birth they will learn both, just like that?](http://www.bilingualism-matters.ppls.ed.ac.uk/faq/languages-birth/)

Many experts recommend the ‘one-parent-one-language’ method for a bilingual home. The idea is that Mum always speaks her own language with the children, and Dad always speaks his own language with them. This is a good basis for a successful bilingual home, but it’s not the only one, and even one-parent-one-language can go wrong

* [What are some of the problems with one-parent-one-language?](http://www.bilingualism-matters.ppls.ed.ac.uk/faq/problems-oneparentonelanguage/)

One problem can be balance. Children need to hear both languages often and in a variety of circumstances. If they never hear a language except from one parent, they may not get enough exposure for that language to develop naturally.

Grandparents can be especially helpful! Can you enlist a cousin or grandmother or a paid babysitter who speaks the other language to look after the children? Is there a daycare or playgroup where they can hear the other language? Can you get videos and story tapes in the other language? All of these can make a big difference; especially exposure that involves interaction with other people, not just watching TV.

Another problem is keeping the situation natural. If children feel that they are being forced to do something weird or embarrassing, they will probably resist it. Explicit rules say, speaking one language on some days and the other on others can be very hard to enforce and can help create a negative attitude.

Still another problem is exclusion. If one of the parents doesn’t speak the other’s language the children will know that every time they say something to their father they are excluding their mother from the conversation. This may make children reluctant to speak one of the parents’ languages when both parents are present. In our experience, a bilingual home is more likely to succeed if both parents at least understand both languages. That way, nobody is ever excluded from a family conversation.

* [What about siblings?](http://www.bilingualism-matters.ppls.ed.ac.uk/faq/siblings/)

The arrival of a second child can upset the language balance in a bilingual home, and it’s common for a second child to be less fully bilingual than the first. Usually the first child speaks to the second in the ‘more important’ language, increasing the exposure the second child gets to that language and decreasing the sense of need for the ‘less important’ one. Think about what you want to do about this in advance. Come up with a strategy that fits your own situation, but it’s probably worthwhile to try to enlist the older child or children to promote the ‘less important’ language in your home situation

* [My children used to speak our home language just fine, but now that they’re going to school, they mix it up with English all the time. What can I do?](http://www.bilingualism-matters.ppls.ed.ac.uk/faq/home-language-mix-english/)

Relax. Language mixing is normal where everyone speaks both languages. It doesn’t mean that the children will forget one language, and it doesn’t mean that they can’t tell the difference any more between two languages. If you scold them for speaking English it may create a negative attitude about the home language and actually make things worse. Instead, create natural situations where the children really need the home language: like calling on those grandparents again!

You can understand this kind of language mixing if you keep in mind that simple exposure is an important ingredient of children’s language development. When your children were small, they were probably more exposed to your home language – say Korean – than they were to English. Now that they are going to school, they are exposed only to English for hours a day, and they are learning all kinds of new words and new ways of using language, but only in English. They probably don’t know the Korean word for ‘notebook’ or ‘social studies’ or ‘principal’. When they use an English word in a Korean sentence, tell them what it’s called in the home language rather than worrying that they’re losing their home language. Remember, even if they end up with English as their dominant language, they can still be perfectly competent home language speakers as well