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4 tips for raising a Multilingual Child

孩子輕鬆學習多種語言的四大要訣

A lot of parents are having all sorts of doubts in their minds on the path of learning a language, with the most common one being the confusing thoughts their children experience resulting from learning multiple languages. However, while these concerns of parents are understandable, there is in fact no need to worry at all. Children have an inherent ability to pick up multiple languages at the same time in a natural language environment, as long as parents demonstrate enough patience and adhere to the following points throughout children's learning process:

1. To be crystal clear about the setting of roles in regard to language.

I recall a time when my elder son was born, a nurse from the maternity ward told me not to worry about kids mixing up different language in a multi lingual household. Each member of the family should set a default language from the beginning and keep it unchanged when communicating with kids. Thus, children will be able to distinguish between different speakers and respond to each one in different languages respectively. Her words are still of great benefit to me to this day. My kids can now switch smoothly across English, Cantonese and Mandarin. For instance, they communicate with teachers and classmates in English at school whereas chatting with grandparents in Cantonese at home.

Please bear in mind that there is an intrinsic link between language and recognition of identity. Children will associate the identities of family members with the languages they speak. For example, Dad is associated with French, while Mom is associated with Cantonese and the caregiver is associated with English. Therefore, it is crucial that parents do not change the way they communicate with kids to avoid striking them as strangers.

## 2. Parents should stick to the same language that they talk to children at the start

The conversations between parents and kids that I overhear while walking the streets of Hong Kong are something like this: 你要apple定係orange啊？我地而家go back home 喇！你食唔食fish啊？..... They often use a combination of Chinese and English words on purpose or subconsciously to communicate with kids in hopes of improving their foreign language proficiency. Contrary to expectations, their disorderly use of several languages is bound to cause confusion in the way children speak and leave them feeling clueless, which in turn will lead to added difficulty of learning foreign languages. This is a huge pitfall for children trying to learn a language that will do nothing other than harm.

## 3. Creating an authentic language environment

It is an authentic language environment that can provide the soil necessary for growth and development since language as a communication tool does not emerge out of the void. An authentic language environment offers children a rich variety of lively resources for language learning and travelling is considered the best way to provide children with an authentic environment. Speaking from my personal experience, I often travel with my kids to Taiwan to enrich their Mandarin learning process. We are in constant interaction with real life situations as we enjoy the beautiful sceneries and appreciate local culture & customs. These experiences have further strengthened their desire to engage in communication so that they keep improving their speaking skills by osmosis and fluency has naturally followed as a result.

## 4. To build and preserve children's motivation to learn

Motivation is an important factor in deciding whether a student, regardless of age, will succeed in mastering a new language. While adults have an incentive to become multilingual mainly to meet job requirements, the reason why children become interested in learning several languages is relatively straightforward. It might be that they really like a teacher, or have made friends with fellow students who speak other languages, or simply because of a movie or an animated character. A considerable amount of teaching practices have proven that the spur of strong motivation leads to enhanced speaking skills and improved memory, eventually doubling the learning result with half the effort. Hence, carefully designed learning experience is the first step toward stimulating

children's motivation and preserving this motivation is the key to making sure children will persist in studying the language. Quite a few parents tend to ask immediately after a class what their kids have learned and memorized or what the teacher has taught et cetera. These seemingly casual questions are in fact discouraging children's motivation. The reason they choose to remain silent is that the vocabulary and sentence structures they have accumulated are insufficient to enable them to answer the questions. In the long run, these unpleasant learning experiences will erode children's motivation. Therefore, it is important for parents to take a long term perspective when educating children in order to preserve and fortify their motivation in a proper way.

To sum up, it is not as difficult as most people have assumed for children to learn multiple language at the same time since their brains are equipped with this amazing mechanism to distinguish between different languages. With attentive observation and the adoption of appropriate approaches, we can help them open doors to a new horizon, leading them to a vivid world of language.

This is an English translation of the blog published at

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