



Multilingual Families

# WHY RAISE CHILDREN MULTILINGUAL

Introductory Brochure For Teachers  
With Questions They Might Be Asked By Parents



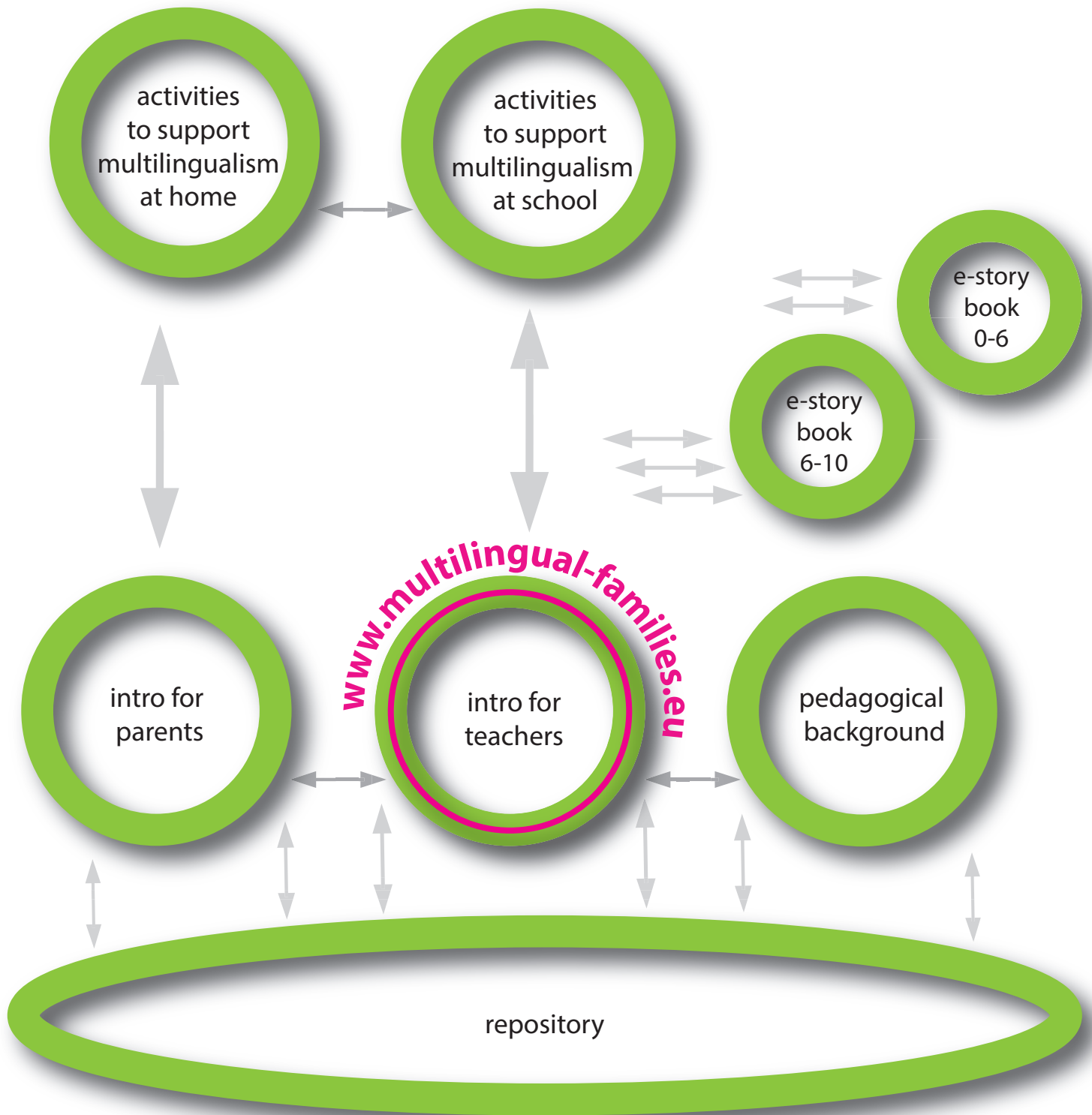
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# WHY SHOULD A TEACHER SUPPORT MULTILINGUALISM?

Do you have multilingual children in your groups or classes? Have you ever wondered whether raising children in two or more languages is a good idea? Did it worry you, if you could or should support these children, or whether the dominant language or the family's language should be pre-eminent?

The European Multilingual Families project will provide direct answers to these and other questions you may have. The project is targeted at preserving the languages and culture of immigrants and families with parents with more than one language living in the European Union. These people represent a linguistic treasure house for Europe and one that must be preserved to enhance the linguistic and multi-cultural diversity of Europe.

Many of these families have the potential to raise their children in more than one language but they might not be convinced of the benefits it brings.

This handbook will show:

1. Why they should do so?
2. How they can do so?
3. How you as a teacher or nursery educator can support multilingualism and multilingual children in your class?

As a teacher, you are in a great position to help these families (immigrants or parents from more than one country) raise their children multilingually and this handbook will show you why and how.

You will find information here on why growing up with two or more languages is a great advantage for children.

In the *Multilingual Families Teacher Guide* you will find a number of activities and how you can help in the process. You will also discover that it is not difficult to do and your institution can benefit as well.

## THE ADVANTAGES OF BEING MULTILINGUAL



There are still a lot of parents who choose not to speak their native language to their children for various reasons, or who have been persuaded that speaking their languages to them can hurt the children socially or academically, if the primary lan-

guage of the community is different. The reasons to support children with more than one language, which you find in this guide, will help you inform parents about the benefits of multilingualism.

### CREATIVITY

Multilingualism can have a beneficial effect on the development of creative thinking (Kharkhurin, 2012).

### OPEN MINDEDNESS

Children brought up in a multilingual environment often develop an appreciation for other cultures and acceptance of cultural differences, which is a competence highly sought-after in adults (Coelho, 2012).

### FLEXIBILITY

Knowing more than one language helps children feel at ease in different environments. It creates a natural flexibility and adaptability (Cunningham-Andersson, Andersson, 2004).

### COGNITIVE ABILITIES

Multilingual children display greater cognitive flexibility, better problem solving and higher order thinking skills. The intuitive and natural way of learning languages can spur children on to a deeper and broader passion for learning in general (Baker, 2001).

### COMMUNICATION

Language learning improves communication skills in general (Boysson-Bardies, 1999).

### CONFIDENCE

Allowing children to be what they are – by including their cultural and linguistic background, – helps them develop a natural self-confidence (Cunningham-Andersson, Andersson, 2004).

### BROADER WORLDVIEW

Multilingualism encourages new frames of mind and global perspectives (Baker, 1998).

### ENRICHMENT

Immigrants not only bring their native language but also the rich cultures of their native land always present in their language (Tokuhama-Espinosa, 2001).

### DIVERSITY

Multilingual children and children of immigrants can represent a bridge to the heritage and history of their different cultures and bring to life new stories and traditions (Min, 1997).

## WHAT CAN YOU DO TO SUPPORT MULTILINGUALISM

It has been clearly shown that raising a child multilingually is best if started at birth and should continue every day of the child's life and it's an

on-going process (Xiao-Lei, 2008). Teachers can play an important and essential role in creating and supporting a language friendly environment.

### CREATE NEW LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES

Effective pre-school and primary school provision emphasizes communication, language and literacy that integrate with all the other important aspects of learning (e.g. personal, social and emotional development, mathematical development, knowledge and understanding of the world, physical development and creative development). Multiple language development is encouraged through virtually every pre-school and primary school activity e.g. when playing, role playing, eating, arriving and leaving.

### ENCOURAGE INDIVIDUAL DEVELOPMENT OF CHILDREN

An effective nursery, pre-school or school institution will be sensitive to the language levels of all children in all of their languages and seek to encourage individual development. Sensitivity to personal needs and plans to linguistically develop each child are highly desirable. For example, giving instructions that each child understands, and using a level of language that sequentially enhances that child's language skills are important.

### PROVIDE EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES TO ALL CHILDREN

Equally valuable is giving the child plenty of opportunity and encouragement to practice their multiple language skills, each child needs the opportunity to be an active speaker and not just a passive listener. This can be achieved by individual conversations between children, but also by group activities like singing, saying rhymes, collaborative play, games and creative tasks. It is beneficial to allow language development across situations and activities, and in all languages. Young children enjoy stories, songs and short poems, and such oral experiences are linked to literacy. A library of children's books in all languages, as well as DVDs, video, tapes and specialist computer programs will support early years' language learning. Wall displays and themes, for each week or month, can include two or more languages.

An effective pre-school and primary school is a language-rich environment, in terms of teachers' communication and planned activities, material resources and stimulating play, and the encouragement of multiple language use that provides a multilingual foundation not only for school but for life.



## QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

The aim of this section is to answer frequently asked questions that parents, teachers and others most often ask about raising multilingual children. These have been carefully collected after a great deal of research into the subject. Straightforward answers follow, written in direct, plain language. The questions reflect central issues that people regularly meet in deciding about multilingualism in the home. In case you are asked a question which is not included here, the bibliography section contains many useful links to re-

sources which can be referred to. The answers to the questions will raise awareness of what challenges may be faced as multilingual family life develops and what decisions may have to be made.



### WHAT ARE THE ADVANTAGES TO RAISING MULTILINGUAL CHILDREN?

There are many good reasons for raising children multilingually. Aside from the obvious advantage of being able to speak more than one language, it impacts a child positively in the sense of self-esteem, future job opportunities and ability to live and travel abroad. In addition, the child is more aware and involved in the culture of the parents' country of origin. Children who are fluent in two or more languages also have cognitive advantages in comparison to those who speak only one language (Boysson-Bardies, 1999). For example, they are better at solving problems that involve focusing on relevant information while ignoring irrelevant information. Additionally, analytical, social and literacy skills are improved when growing up with several languages. (Genesee, 2007)

### WHAT IS THE BEST WAY TO RAISE A MULTILINGUAL CHILD?

There are many ways to raise a child with multiple languages. While it is true that children may learn another language under chaotic conditions, but in fact most families find that having a fixed language system in the home makes it easier for everyone (Tabors, 1997). Whichever way is chosen and the more consistent and transparent the approach is, the easier it is for the child. In the literature you will find some methods to raise multilingual children (One Person, One Language, or Minority Language at Home), but it is important to bear in mind that these methods are a kind of artificial constructions which are useful for theory, overviews and explanations but that in real life they are often mixed or used a little less consistently. In the long run, what feels most natural to a family will work best.

### WHEN IS THE BEST TIME TO START?

The sooner, the better! Neurological studies have clearly shown that babies from the age of two months are already beginning to start preparing for the language or languages they will use later on. From the first days at home after birth, the approach that has been decided should be used and stuck too. It has also been shown that a child with two or more languages finds it much easier to acquire additional languages (Eliot, 2000).

### IS IT TOO LATE TO INTRODUCE AN ADDITIONAL LANGUAGE WHEN A CHILD ALREADY SPEAKS ONE?

Absolutely not! When introducing older children to a language, with the goal of making them fluent multilinguals, the first consideration is building the motivation. If you are not sure how to do it, please refer to the Multilingual Families Parents' Guide. After starting to speak one language, learning another language requires some effort from the child, unlike acquiring two or more languages simultaneously from birth. Motivation is the key factor.

### WHAT DO WE NEED TO DO TO MAKE SURE CHILDREN WILL LEARN BOTH LANGUAGES FULLY?

Learning two or more languages in infancy and early childhood is as natural as learning only one language. Young children have the innate capacity to acquire full competence in two or more languages. It has been estimated that as many as 50% of the world's population are at least bilingual (Bialystok, 2001). Multilingual children can acquire the same proficiency in the phonological and grammatical aspects of their two or more languages as monolingual children do in their one language, provided they are given regular and substantial exposure to their languages. Parents should ensure that their children are exposed to all languages over a sustained and continuous period of time.

### IS IT NORMAL FOR CHILDREN TO LEARN TWO OR MORE LANGUAGES AT THE SAME TIME?

Based on the number of children around the world who are raised speaking more than one language, multilingual acquisition is probably more “normal” than monolingualism. Most importantly, there has been considerable scientific research that is showing that young infants’ brains are equipped to learn multiple languages in early childhood. These studies show that multilingual children go through the same basic milestones in language acquisition as those who learn only one language (Tabors, 1997).

### IS IT TRUE THAT THE CHILDREN BECOME CONFUSED WHEN LEARNING MORE THAN ONE LANGUAGE?

Some parents are concerned when they hear their children use sounds and words from different languages in the same conversation. They believe that it means that the child is confused and cannot separate the languages. This is a common mistake. Mixing languages is a natural and normal aspect of early multilingual acquisition. Children borrow from other languages when they lack sufficient vocabulary to express themselves entirely in one language. Parents should not try to stop their children from mixing as they will naturally stop doing it, unless of course mixing is a frequent form of language use in the community (Baker, 2000). This has been well proven by decades of research and countless families around the world, including the many countries where multilingualism is the norm, not the exception, such as Canada, Belgium, Switzerland, and Finland.

### IS THE LANGUAGE ACQUISITION OF MULTILINGUAL CHILDREN DELAYED?

It used to be suggested that multilingual children were a little slower learning to speak than monolingual children. This is no longer an accepted view. (Genesee, 2007) In any case, any such difference is very small. Children who have regular and rich exposure to two or more languages on a daily or weekly basis from parents and other caregivers exhibit the same milestones in language development and at roughly the same age as monolingual children. Multilingual children vary from one another just as monolingual children do; some acquire their first words or use complex speech much earlier than others.

### WHAT CAN WE DO WHEN CHILDREN REFUSE TO SPEAK THE FAMILY LANGUAGE?

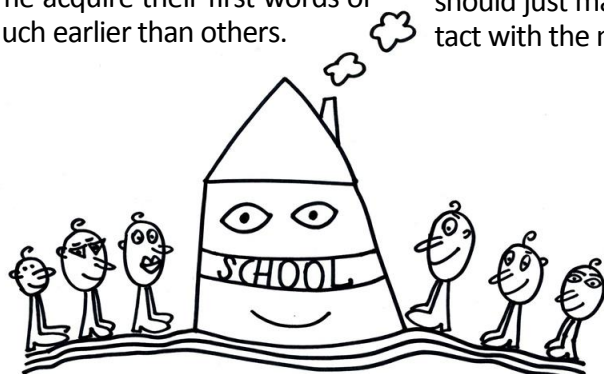
Motivating children to use two or more languages can sometimes be the biggest challenge in raising children multilingually, especially with older children. This is especially true when it comes to using a language that is not used widely outside the home (Baker, 2000). Generally, all children wish to conform with other children and they may hesitate to use the “family” language if it is not used by their friends. In these cases, parents must devise strategies to motivate their child to use the language – for example, by creating playgroups with other children who speak the language or by retaining contacts with relatives who speak the language. Otherwise, the child may not see the value in using it and may even feel embarrassed using it.

### SHOULD FAMILY LANGUAGES (IF OTHER THAN THE MAJORITY LANGUAGE) BE USED IN KINDERGARTENS OR SCHOOLS?

Yes! It is important, that family languages are cherished at kindergarten and at school. The child experiences acknowledgement of these languages by using them and experiencing other people using them as well outside the family context. This fosters language awareness for everybody involved, provides contact with the languages and playful opportunities to use all languages. Talk to the staff in the educational institutes of the children and ask about the tradition and culture dealing with multilingualism in the institution. Parents are experts in their languages and educators should hear about their cultures, language habits and ways of use.

### PARENTS WANT THE CHILDREN TO LEARN THE MAJORITY/NATIONAL LANGUAGE WELL. SHOULD THEY SPEAK THE MAJORITY/NATIONAL LANGUAGE WITH THEM IN THEIR HOME?

They do not need to. Parents should use the languages they are best at or like the most. Children can learn languages also from other people (for example from people, that are also part of their family, friends, or at kindergarten and at school). Parents should just make sure the children have enough contact with the national language/s as well!



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## WHAT ARE THE MOST COMMON MISTAKES PARENTS MAKE?

Active exposure to languages means that children not only hear other people using a language, but they are actively involved in using the language themselves. Children with only passive exposure to language, by overhearing adults for example, or watching TV, will not develop the ability to use the language proficiently. If children are to develop competence expressing themselves in two or more languages, they must be actively engaged in using all languages with others who know those languages. A consistent language system provides structure, predictability, and security. This in turn

promotes learning. Parents should encourage their children to use two or more languages and make the learning process fun and natural by planning many activities with varied interactions, including themselves, other adults, children of different ages, relatives, playgroups, and anything else they can think of that will expose their child to the family's language. And above all, parents should remember to praise their children frequently and provide the translations only when necessary. They should not correct mistakes; however, if they find it necessary, they could repeat the words correctly (Harding-Esch, Riley 2003).



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