

Home schooling in more than one language

by Hendrine Krieg © December 2013

Most people speak and use one language at home. Some families, however, speak more than one language. This may be because the parents speak different languages, or because the family uses a different language than the community around them. If choosing to home school is a major decision in the life of a family, choosing to do so in more than one language is even more so! In South Africa the decision to home school in more languages is not so far-fetched, as we live in a multilingual community.

As with most things, the reason for doing something influences the way in which one would do it. This is especially true for home schooling in more than one language. If you only want your child to be fluent in different languages, it will be much easier to achieve than when you want your child to complete all the study material required by two different countries.

Language learning and learning in a language cannot be separated. To be able to learn in a language, you must be fluent in that language. Reading is our major weapon in language learning. Read to your children in all the languages that you want them to master. This can be done from an early age, as babies can distinguish between languages almost immediately.

For babies I would recommend that each parent reads in his/her own language, as babies tend to associate a person with a language. They learn to understand and speak mom's language and dad's language. Pre-schoolers are aware of the fact that one person can speak different languages, which means that one person using different languages will definitely not confuse them. Do not mix languages. Rather read an Afrikaans story one day and an English story on the next day. You can also have "language play days" on which you speak only the second (or third) language. This helps kids to be able to express themselves comfortably in everyday situations. Friends who speak the other language help a lot! Watching favourite films contribute greatly to language proficiency. It helps with understanding and pronunciation, as well as correct use of idioms and expressions. Choose wisely...

Learning to read and write is ideally done in your mother tongue. Very few people are so completely bilingual that this does not matter to them. Almost all of us have one language in which we think, feel and dream. Once your first grader has mastered the skill of reading in his first language, the addition of another is usually without major problems, as the same skill needs only to be applied to a second set of words (which the child already knows). The same applies for writing. My own first grader wanted to read a book in English (her third language). I allowed it on the condition that she reads it herself. Her opinion was: "If I can read in German, I can read in English as well!"

Children who read a lot usually have little difficulty spelling words in the language that they read in. Multilingual kids therefore need to read in all their languages. Provide enough books!

Tackling school subjects or themes in more than one language can be a daunting task if you want to do everything in both languages. Rather do a task (or a complete subject) in one language, and then discuss the lesson in the other language. This can be done informally ("Tell Daddy what you have learnt in Biology today") or more formally by practising the relevant vocabulary in writing.

When learning mathematics, however, the "thinking" language plays a role again. Some experts recommend that maths should be learnt in your mother tongue, because you need to develop an internal "calculating language". Do a quick sum in your head – you will notice that it needs language, and that it is far easier in your "own" language. Once basic maths has been mastered, the same procedure as for other subjects can be followed.

A few things need to be remembered:

- 1) Some kids are more comfortable language users than others. Take this into account with each child. Do not expect the impossible, but do not expect too little.
- 2) Multilingual children do not mix languages. They do sometimes “borrow” words if they cannot remember a specific word. This is often the case between second and third languages, as the vocabulary for these languages are stored in the brain as “other languages”.
- 3) Languages open doors. Use them to explore more worlds.