

# Raising bilingual children

## Mother tongue language

### *More important than you think?*

When families have the opportunity to move abroad they often focus their attention on the new aspects of life for their children: a new home, a new school, a new language and new friends. What sometimes gets lost is what they are taking with them - their mother tongue. While living abroad can be a great opportunity for children to learn another language, it shouldn't be at the expense of their own first language.

Raskrabbel had the opportunity to let local director Renske Maandag and academic specialist Eowyn Crisfield of LanguageOne tell us more about this subject. Not in our mother tongue Dutch, but in Eowyn's first language: English, the language we share. LanguageOne is a leading international organisation that develops high-quality mother tongue programmes for children aged 2½ to 18 years, who (temporarily or permanently) live abroad.

#### *Why is the mother tongue important?*

Eowyn: "What we know from educational research is that a child's first language (mother tongue, home language, et cetera) plays a crucial role in linguistic, cognitive and social development. This role extends into the classroom as well, where increasing proficiency in the home language will help them to learn the new school language more efficiently as well. In addition to these important factors, the home language also remains a vital link to identity and culture."

#### *What are the benefits of continuing to use the mother tongue while living abroad?*

Renske: "When moving abroad from The Netherlands, children often identify more with the other Dutch speaking children. A big part of your culture is your mother tongue and all traditions and habits that come with that culture. Expressing yourself and making friends tends to be easier in the language that (one of) your parents speak, especially at a young age. Learning a second language is also easier when you are flexible towards languages and communication. Maintaining the mother tongue helps children to learn a new language at school. On top of that, speaking more than one language at an academic level is a great asset on the long run, even if at the time, it doesn't seem to be.

On top of that, speaking more than one language at an academic level is a great asset on the long run, even if at the time, it doesn't seem to be. Finally, one of the most crucial factors to blend in with your peers when moving back to The Netherlands, is the language you speak. The more you practise and feel comfortable in your mother tongue, the easier the repatriation will be."

#### *What can parents do at home to support their children?*

Eowyn: "Make sure you are addressing the various languages in your family and your environment with your children, and having positive discussions about the role of each. No matter how long you will be in a country, and whether or not you personally choose to learn any of the language, you can make a difference for your child by being positive about their opportunities to learn and use another language, if only briefly. Model positive attitudes about all languages, whether you can speak them or not, and model making an effort to communicate with others: we can all learn to say 'Hello, how are you?' or 'Thank you' in other languages, and if we expect it of our children, we should surely be willing ourselves."

Renske adds: "For Dutch families, this can be achieved by reading Dutch books together, watch Dutch television programs or Skype with the family back home in The Netherlands. Furthermore, the children also benefit from discussing the content of the International School in an alternative home or mother tongue language. When languages grow naturally together in content, the attitude towards those languages is more likely to be a positive one and the child will be less apprehensive towards using this language."

#### *What if no one in our surrounding speaks the same language?*

Eowyn: "If you are a parent passing on a minority or low-status language, be firm in your own belief about the benefit(s) of your language, and pass this belief on to your children. They need to know that the parents' languages have value, no matter what other people say, and they will be able to use these languages to access their own heritage.

Praise them for their efforts in using multiple languages, and acknowledge to them the hard work they are doing! In all bilingual families, it's important to start from a place of mutual respect and support, and the understanding that the languages of both parents are equally important for children, regardless of the immediate or eventual usefulness of the language."

### *So how do parents start?*

"Every family raising bilingual children needs to have, at the very least, one family language plan. Ideally, they should start the planning process at the same time as they start all the other planning for baby preparations - during pregnancy. When moving abroad and changing the language of schooling, it's important to take a plan with you for the continuing growth of the language(s) your children already speak."

### *What does this family language plan look like?*

"A family language plan is a longitudinal plan that follows a child from birth (or later) through to the end of secondary school, to give the parents and child the best chance for success. The process of creating a family language plan helps parents consider their options, prioritize, and take the necessary steps to reach their goals. This includes goal-setting, mapping out where the input in each language will come from (in terms of people and time), how literacy will be approached in each language and how challenges will be dealt with. One plan is fine for families who are living permanently in one location.

Families who move, or who may move, need to have alternate plans, each one designed for a certain set of circumstances. The benefits to this type of planning are numerous, and include ensuring quality language input in a variety of situations, and also include elements such as support for literacy and additional languages. By anticipating the language needs of the children across different life circumstances, the parents have a better chance of guiding their children towards full and functional bilingualism."

*If this article has given you pause to think about your own family languages, there are many avenues to find more information about this topic or other related topics. Here is a list of recommended resources:*

#### **Blogs**

Eowyn Crisfield's blog:

<http://Onraisingbilingualchildren.com>

Life as a Bilingual:

<https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/life-bilingual>

Multilingual Living:

<http://www.multilingualliving.com/>

#### **Books**

Colin Baker - *A Parent's and Teacher's Guide to Bilingualism*

Barbara Zurer Pearson - *Raising a Bilingual Child*

*Should you have questions about Dutch mother tongue programmes, please contact Renske Maandag at LanguageOne (renske.maandag@languageone.org), [www.languageone.org](http://www.languageone.org).*

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