

**Bilingual**  
**AND**  
**Trilingual**  
**PARENTING 101**

A Practical Handbook for Multilingual Families  
(3rd Edition)

**KA YEE MECK**

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THIRD EDITION

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# PREFACE TO THE THIRD EDITION

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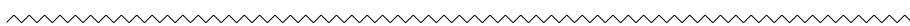
**W**elcome to the third edition of *Bilingual and Trilingual Parenting 101*! First of all, I'd like to say a big thank you to all my readers, YouTube channel followers and website subscribers who have supported me on this incredible journey. My goal, as always, is to empower families around the world to reap the benefits of speaking more than one language and to add value to their lives with my work. Families like yours are the source of my motivation. I sincerely hope that this book, along with the other books and material available through my other platforms – will make a difference to your family's life, however small.

Since the publication of the first edition of this book in August 2021, I have gained a lot more experience in raising my children to be trilingual, especially when it comes to reading and writing. For this edition, **I have made major updates to the chapter on reading and writing** (Chapter 7: Establishing an Effective and Enjoyable Reading and Writing Routine)

to share with my readers some of the things I have learnt along the way. What's more, **this edition also includes a link to a free bonus “cheat sheet”** (Chapter 10) that you can download for quick reference around your home.

I have also cleaned up some typos and miscellaneous errors (of which there were too many in the first edition!) and given the paperback version a brand-new, more contemporary look, which I hope will improve your reading experience. In addition, the “Useful Resources” section has been updated with some new entries – thank you to my readers who reached out to me with some new gems they've found online!

# INTRODUCTION AND HOW TO USE THIS BOOK



**F**irst of all, thank you so much for choosing this book. There is certainly no shortage of books on the subject of bilingualism, and a virtually unlimited amount of information on the subject is at the reader's disposal at the click of a button on Google. So why do we need another book on how to raise multilingual children?

This **compact, no-nonsense handbook** has been created specifically for busy modern parents, who don't have the time to trawl through the vast existing literature and online information. If you're looking for **a step-by-step guide on how to activate your child's linguistic ability**, as well as **practical tips and advice that you can put into practice today**, I am confident that this book is just what you need. Essentially, I have done all the reading and research, so you don't have to!

Aside from general tips and advice on how to raise bilingual/ trilingual children, **I will also share with you a highly effective method for tackling an extremely common problem: your child can understand the target language but always replies to you in English** (or whatever language is dominant where you live). To my knowledge, this is the only book on the market that tackles this specific problem.

I have deliberately kept this book light on academic theory, but you will find all the necessary references in the endnotes section; while I've kept technical jargon to a minimum, a glossary section has been included that explains any technical terms used throughout this book.

Just as importantly, this book was written from a parent's perspective. It's truly a book created *for* parents *by* a real-life parent. While I don't have a PhD in Linguistics, I *am* a mum of two who is actively (and successfully, if I say so myself!) raising her own children to be fluent in three languages. As such, **I will only share with you techniques that I have used and would use with my children; techniques that *anyone* could implement in real life.**

Besides my parenting "credentials", I also have a decade of professional experience in translation and language teaching – language learning and teaching is both my passion and my bread and butter. Through this book and my website ([www.multilingualfamilyhub.com](http://www.multilingualfamilyhub.com)), **my one overriding goal is to help other families out there who want to raise bilingual, trilingual and multilingual children, and reap all the benefits that being fluent in more than one language brings.**



**I truly believe that *anyone* can successfully help their child become bilingual or trilingual. All you need is determination, perseverance, and the right tools and methods.** My husband and I were so close to abandoning our goal of raising our kids to be trilingual, as the obstacles seemed simply too great. I will share with you the story of how we overcame these obstacles. If we can do it, so can you!

Welcome on board this amazing journey – Yes, it will almost certainly be a bumpy ride, and at times, you may want to tear your hair out, scream in frustration and even be tempted to throw in the towel altogether, *but* I promise you – **as long as you don't give up, and hopefully with the help of this book, you will get there.** And the tremendous rewards both for you and your child will be worth all the effort a hundred times over!

So, are you ready to help your child achieve their language potential, discover the beauty and wonders of languages, and reap all the benefits of being fluent in more than one language?

Let's go!

## HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

This book was conceived as a practical how-to guide that readers can dip in and out of.

If you're still expecting your first child or in the very early stages of your bilingual/ multilingual journey, it's a good idea to simply read this book in the order it's written to get an overview of everything. Feel free to skip over any sections that are not relevant to you at this stage – you can always come back to them later.

If you specifically want to find out how to help your child make that transition from understanding the target language (see Glossary in the Appendix) but not speaking it, to actively speaking the target language, feel free to skip straight to Chapter 6. In that chapter, I will guide you through step-by-step what I've called "The Bootcamp Method", an intensive "training programme" that has been specifically developed to tackle this very common and often tricky issue.

If you are interested in establishing an effective and – no less importantly – enjoyable routine to help your child build literacy skills in the target language, jump straight to Chapter 7 for my top 10 useful tips.

Chapter 8 is structured like an "FAQ" section, answering some common questions parents may have when raising multilingual children.

For inspiration, activity ideas and resources, check out Chapters 9 and 10. Everything is bullet-pointed for easy reference.



**Please note:**

1. For the sake of simplicity, I will use the plural forms (“they”, “them”, and “their”) when referring to a “child” throughout this book.
2. All the “case studies” in this book are 100% based on people I know in real life. To protect their privacy, all names have been changed. On the other hand, “examples” are hypothetical and are not based on real people I know.
3. I try to avoid technical jargon as much as possible, but it’s difficult to write a book like this without the occasional references to technical terms. Please see the Glossary section for a quick explanation of some key terms used throughout this book.
4. I will use the words “Chinese” and “Mandarin” interchangeably throughout this book. The term “Cantonese” will refer to the Cantonese variant specifically.



# Chapter 1

## MY FAMILY'S LANGUAGE JOURNEY

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This is *not* a book about my family and me, so I'll only share with you what's relevant. This chapter will be a brief summary of the journey my husband and I have undertaken in raising our kids to be trilingual, and how we overcame the “my-kid-will-only-speak-to-me-in-English” problem.

In September 2016, I became a first-time mum to my son, Alexey. Even before he was born, my husband and I already started thinking about which languages we should speak to him in.

I was born in Shanghai, China, before moving to Hong Kong as a toddler. My mother was born and raised in Shanghai; her mother tongue is Shanghainese but she's also fluent in Mandarin as well as Cantonese (and now English too).

Having spent most of my childhood in the British colony, I consider my mother tongue to be Cantonese, but due to my family connections, I am also fluent in Mandarin and have been working as a translator and Mandarin language instructor for a decade. Although my mother's mother tongue is Shanghainese, she never used the language at home, probably because my father did not speak the language. It's something I mildly regret – Shanghai natives are a famously proud bunch, and they don't always remember (or bother) to switch to Mandarin for my benefit!

To make things more complicated, though, I've lived in the UK since the age of seventeen. Having spent more than half of my life and all my adult life in the UK, I consider myself to be perfectly fluent in English. In terms of literacy skills and vocabulary size, English is undoubtedly my strongest language. In fact, in most everyday and professional situations, I feel most comfortable in English, so to all intents and purposes, English is now my dominant language.

My husband was born in Russia in the late 1970s before emigrating to Australia as a teenager. He considers Russian to be his mother tongue, although, like me, his dominant language is now probably English due to having lived in English-speaking countries (first Australia, then the UK) for three decades.

For him, it was an easy decision – he would speak to our son in Russian. However, more controversially, he also wanted me to speak Russian when the three of us were interacting together, which was a pretty daunting prospect for me as my command of Russian was (and still is) very basic.

Before Alexey was born, I couldn't decide if I should speak to him in Cantonese (a Chinese variant spoken in Hong Kong and the Canton/Guangdong region of China) or Mandarin (the official language of China). In fact, I think the first few days after he was born, I just spoke to him in English – my brain was a total mush in those early days, and all grand plans I had about raising a trilingual kid were all but forgotten in a sleep-deprived fog. But gradually, speaking to him in Cantonese came naturally to me, and that's the language I used with him for the first two years of his life.

Alexey started speaking a bit later than his monolingual peers, but his development was still well within the normal range. At age two, he had a vocabulary of about 50 words, most of which were English, the rest a mix of Cantonese and Russian. He understood all three languages very well. When he was 19 months old, his little sister Alina was born, and I also spoke to her in Cantonese.

My husband and I always knew that we wanted our kids to learn Mandarin because it's a much more widely spoken language and, therefore, arguably more “useful” than Cantonese. But to begin with, we thought three languages were enough to start with, so Mandarin was “put on hold”. However, around the time Alexey turned two, I had an informal chat with a language specialist at our local children's center, who said there was no reason not to introduce Mandarin now if we planned to do it at some point anyway. So, at this point, my husband and I consciously decided to add Mandarin to our household language mix. In reality, I soon began to

use Mandarin exclusively with the children and gradually dropped Cantonese, as I found it difficult to keep two languages going in parallel. With the knowledge I have now, I probably would've done things differently – it certainly *is* possible to raise quadrilingual children, and I'll offer suggestions on how to do that later in this book.

When I first introduced Mandarin, Alexey did seem somewhat confused, but to my relief, he picked up the new language very quickly, at least in terms of passive understanding. By age three, he understood everything that my mother or I said to him in Mandarin, and he could say approximately ten words and phrases. Yet, despite relatively good progress, Alexey would always reply in English whenever my husband or I talked to him in our respective languages.

At the time, I thought this was quite normal – and it *is*, of course. In my experience talking to other multilingual families, this seems to be a very common scenario. “My child understands everything I say,” the mum would tell me, “But he always answers in English. What can you do?”

At that time, my husband and I kind of just accepted the situation for what it was – that Alexey could understand Russian and Mandarin but not speak them. Well, I thought, that's still better than nothing. If he wants to pick it up later, he can, surely – or so I reasoned.

One day, I was at our local children's centre when an Albanian nanny commented on how I was reading a book with my kids in Chinese. We were looking at pictures of animals in a book. I would say the animal name in Chinese, and the kids would point at the correct picture. And here I was,



feeling pretty proud of myself and even a bit smug! But the Albanian lady said, why don't you teach them to say the words in Chinese? "Pointing is easy," she said, "anyone can do it!"

To be honest, I was pretty taken aback by her comment and felt somewhat defensive. I explained that Alexey understood Chinese perfectly but would only speak in English. She wasn't being rude but genuinely wanted to give me some helpful advice. Her own children, she told me, were fully bilingual and bi-literate (see Glossary) in both English and Albanian. She went on to tell me that the family she worked for was also very strict about making the kids speak the parents' languages (Swedish and German). So strict, in fact, that the Albanian nanny had never heard the mum say *a single word* of English in the children's presence, ever, not even a simple word like "no"! Her point was that it *can* be done.

That really got me thinking – maybe I am not trying hard enough? *Were my husband and I just taking the path of least resistance?* Was it just wishful thinking on our part to think that one day, *if and when* they want to, they can just pick things up easily and start speaking the languages effortlessly?

### **The turning point**

Everything changed on a typically grey autumn day in London in November 2019. We were at a friend's birthday party when I started chatting to Guy (name has been changed), a French-speaking dad. He was married to a New Zealander, and their two beautiful daughters were fully bilingual in English and French. I explained our situation to him, and the

advice he gave me that day – at the risk of sounding a little dramatic – changed our lives. His advice formed the basis on which I later developed “The Bootcamp Method”.

Firstly, he said, **it’s essential that you should speak to your child in your language most of the time, even in other people’s company.** At this point, I wasn’t very consistent in speaking Mandarin all the time with my children. I would guess that I would switch to English approximately 20-30% of the time, mostly because I felt rude and awkward speaking Chinese to the kids when other people were around. But Guy said that in London, at least, no one would care! And when I really thought about it, I realised that even when I was alone with the children, I sometimes just switched to English for no apparent reason – I wasn’t even *aware* that I was doing it, until I really reflected on it. In retrospect, I probably did it because Alexey always talked to me in English, so it sometimes felt more natural to reply to him in English. So, the first thing I had to do was to be more consistent in using the target language.

The other crucial advice he gave me was this: **every time they say something in English, make them repeat it in your target language. EVERY. SINGLE. TIME.** It’s so simple, yet I realised just how powerful this deceptively obvious technique is over time. It is, by far, the most important thing I did that helped Alexey make that seemingly impossible leap from passive understanding to active speaking.

Anyway, during our conversation, I was intrigued but also daunted by the prospect of doing something that seemed so... *drastic!* And at this point,

Alexey spoke almost *zero* Mandarin – would this really work? How long would it take before I saw the results?

Guy said it would most likely take a few months, but it *would* work if I persevered. Something he said stuck with me – **as their mother or father, you are the centre of your child’s world. If they *have* to speak the target language to communicate with you, they will.** You must create the *need* and *motivation* for them to use the target language.

During our conversation, he also shared with me his family background. He was born in France to Dutch parents, but unfortunately, they never taught him how to speak Dutch. Perhaps they were more focused on assimilating into their small rural town rather than passing down their language to their children. Guy said that this was something that he’d always regretted – he felt that his parents sometimes struggled to communicate their most deeply felt feelings to him because French wasn’t their mother tongue after all. This echoes the sentiments of virtually every one else I’ve spoken to who’s been in a similar situation. So many of my friends and acquaintances have told me, “I wish my parents had spoken to me in Chinese/ Vietnamese/ French...” Making an effort to pass on your language to your child can help preempt such regrets.

Another thing he said that resonated with me was this: **“If you don’t do it, no one else will. It’s you and your child against the world!”** And I thought – this is so true! We’re not in a position to send our kids to a bilingual school, nor do we have a lot of Mandarin-speaking friends and family here. If I don’t put in the work, who will? And dear reader – no one

in the world cares more about your child's education and development than *you* do. *Do this not for yourself, but for your child.* As parents, we would all move mountains for our kids. And while trying to raise a bilingual/ multilingual child is undeniably hard work, it is something that millions of parents around the world have achieved, so simply saying "it's too hard!" really isn't a valid excuse!

Now, back to the story. This serendipitous encounter with a fellow parent gave me the motivation to up my game. In fact, I put his advice into practice the very same day, on our way home from Marylebone to West Hampstead. I still remember our journey home on the 139 bus that day, me speaking Mandarin to Alexey, him replying in English, and me coaxing him to repeat everything in Mandarin... It didn't help that a couple of Chinese students sat just across the aisle from us, watching us in mild amusement. You might find yourself in a similar situation one day but remember, you'll never see these people again, whereas your child's language skills will (hopefully) stay with them forever!

Fast forward four years (at the time of revising the manuscript for the second edition of this book), both Alexey (aged seven) and his sister Alina (aged five and a half) are fluent in Mandarin, Russian and English in varying degrees. In fact, after I started implementing Guy's advice (which I formulated into "The Bootcamp Method" in this book – see Chapter 6) in November 2019, by February 2020, Alexey had already achieved fluency in Chinese. I remember this milestone very clearly because it was around this time when my Chinese cousin, who lives in Berlin, visited us;

she was impressed by Alexey's fluency in Mandarin and was inspired to do the same with her half-German son, Oskar. So, in short, **it only took about *three months* for us to see concrete results.**

Funnily enough, almost exactly a year later to the day, in November 2020, I bumped into Guy at a park in London. I told him how our little chat a year ago had made such a massive difference to our children's linguistic abilities. He was really pleased for us. I told my husband about this chance encounter that same evening; looking back, we couldn't believe that merely twelve months ago, Alexey *only* spoke English and now, merely twelve months later, he spoke *three* languages, albeit imperfectly. Our experience is real-life proof of how daily incremental changes can add to something genuinely life-changing in as little as one year. Had we not done something about it, a year would have passed just as quickly, and nothing – or very little – would've changed in terms of Alexey's ability to speak Mandarin and Russian.

I could be wrong – maybe he would have started speaking these languages of his own accord without our intervention, although, to be honest, I highly doubt it. Based on my observation of other families, if a child doesn't speak the parents' language(s) by about three or four, they are unlikely to start speaking it later on without some intervention or a major change in their linguistic environment (e.g. moving to a different country), especially if they start spending more time at nursery or pre-school. I will explain the reasons for this later in this book.

A “bonus” benefit of our effort was that our second child, Alina, had a much, much smoother path to being trilingual. She started speaking in all three languages from the very early days, and we never had to train her intensively to get her to speak Russian and Chinese. Of course, it might just be a combination of her being female (when it comes to linguistic and communication skills, girls are known to develop at a faster pace than boys in early childhood)<sup>i</sup>, a second child (children with older siblings are known to be more advanced in their development in early childhood)<sup>ii</sup>, and her individual abilities. But it’s also highly possible that having an older brother as a trilingual role model made it much easier for her to do the same from an early age.

All this might not have happened were it not for the advice Guy gave me on that day back in 2019. For this I will always be grateful. And in this book, I’d like to share with you “The Bootcamp Method”, and everything else I’ve learnt about raising multilingual kids along the way so far. Just as Guy has helped me, parent-to-parent, I hope to help you and your family achieve your goals too.

In the next chapter, let’s take a quick look at the wonderful benefits of being fluent in more than one language.

# Chapter 2

## THE BENEFITS OF SPEAKING MORE THAN ONE LANGUAGE

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**B**efore we get to the nuts and bolts of how to raise multilingual kids, I'd like to talk about the benefits of being fluent in more than one language. Even if you're already fully convinced of the benefits of bilingualism or multilingualism, you may still find some useful or interesting facts in this section. Raising multilingual kids can be hard work – keeping these benefits in mind will hopefully help you stay motivated and focused!

### **1. Communicate with family members/ extended family and friends**

This point probably applies to many parents who want to raise their children to be bilingual or multilingual. While you and your partner are

most likely fluent in English (or whichever majority language is applicable to your family), you might have relatives back home who don't speak English; wouldn't it be a pity if your kids couldn't talk to their grandparents or cousins back home?

My mother told me about a Chinese friend who's lived in the UK for over 20 years but speaks very little English. Yet somewhat surprisingly, she never taught her daughter to speak Chinese either. A few years ago, my mother's friend became ill, and due to her lack of English, she needed her daughter to assist with visits to the hospital and other tasks. The mum ended up having to use a dictionary to communicate with her daughter. At this point, the realisation hit home – she had sadly missed the opportunity to pass on her language to her own child, a chance she would never have again. A Vietnamese-Australian friend of mine also laments that he can't discuss anything more profound than what's for dinner with his parents due to the language barrier.

These are obviously extreme examples, but they highlight the most basic function of language – it is ultimately a tool with which to communicate with another human being and **build meaningful relationships**. There's no better reason to learn a language than to speak to a loved one and connect with your heritage, which brings us to the next point.

## **2. Connect with your heritage and cultural identity**

Having a hybrid heritage can be a wonderful thing. We live in a world that increasingly celebrates diversity and embraces the richness of all cultures.



However, the flip side is that **children who do have a heritage – or even two or more heritages – that is different from the dominant culture can sometimes struggle to find their own identity. And being bilingual/ trilingual can help one feel more secure in one’s identity/ identities.**

I’ve read countless interviews where people who come from “immigrant” backgrounds have expressed this sentiment, but one that I’ve read recently particularly resonated with me. I stumbled upon this article while reading up on the Backstreet Boys (as you do!); it’s a fascinating read if you’re interested in how mixed-heritage children can struggle with their own identities<sup>iii</sup>.

One of the group’s five members, Howie Dorough, was born to a Puerto Rican mother and an Irish-American father. In the interview, he said that there were times when he’d be in situations around other Puerto Ricans or Hispanics, and they’d start speaking in Spanish. He’d be looking at them going, “*No hablo español!*” (“I don’t speak Spanish!”) “As I started getting older, I definitely felt challenged with finding my identity,” said Dorough. His inability to speak Spanish also significantly impacted his career: “I realized I was limited by not being able to embrace that side of me, especially in the entertainment world.” But in his later years he took Spanish classes and achieved good fluency. “It’s not the best Spanish – it’s all the present tense [...], but I’ve been able to embrace it now and feel more secure with my culture.”

Being a mother of two mixed-heritage kids, Dorough's experience feels very relevant and instructive. My husband and I hope to give our children the best chance of learning Chinese and Russian well enough to connect to their parental heritages, if they should wish. **Our view is that parents should, where possible, empower their children with these tools; it's then up to the children what to do with them.**

### **3. Gain a more in-depth understanding of other cultures**

This point is closely linked to point two. Just as language is indispensable for connecting to one's heritage, a people's culture is also inextricably linked to its language. **If you want to know a culture in any depth, you need to get to grips with the language that's associated with that culture and/or people; without that knowledge, no matter how many times you visit a place, it will be virtually impossible to move beyond a "Disneyland" cultural experience and a tourist's perspective.** How can it be otherwise if you don't have a clue what the locals are saying to one another, and no idea what any of the TV shows are talking about?

In the case of my own family, although most of our extended family members on both my and my husband's side speak good English, we would still love to enable our kids to learn more about the cultures of their forebears by raising them to be trilingual. When they do visit their parents' native countries one day, they will hopefully gain more cultural insight

than the average tourist and feel empowered to engage with the culture and people in a more meaningful way.

**Not only does being fluent in another language help you navigate other cultures, on a practical level, it also enables you to communicate with a more significant part of humanity.** Knowing the Chinese language, for example, allows you to communicate with *1.4 billion more people*. Sure, an increasing number of people in China and elsewhere are proficient in English to some extent. But as the quote (usually attributed to Nelson Mandela) sums it up beautifully: *“If you talk to a man in a language he understands, that goes to his head. If you talk to him in his own language, that goes to his heart.”*

Quite apart from any practical benefits, **being bilingual or multilingual is simply an enriching experience in its own right.** If you could give them the gift of language from a young age that will enable them to unlock this wonderful wealth of experience over a lifetime, why throw this opportunity away?

#### **4. Broaden children’s horizons and help them become “global citizens”**

The pros and cons of globalisation are clearly beyond the scope of this book. Nevertheless, if you’re reading this book, I hope it’s not too presumptuous to assume that you and your family probably have a somewhat international outlook. It has often been observed that being bilingual or multilingual seems to make people more open-minded.

**Learning a language has a way of opening the mind up to different perspectives and ways of looking at the world, making a person more receptive to the views of others.** I'm sure this is a quality that most parents would love their child to have.

My husband and I and our two children were very fortunate to live in a multicultural, cosmopolitan part of London until 2020. We have many friends from all over the world, many of whom are raising their children to be bilingual or trilingual, too. Because Alexey and Alina now speak Chinese and Russian, in addition to English, they are very aware of other languages and cultures. We'd often look at a world map together and talk about our friends and extended families – “Look, this is Colombia, where Eva's daddy is from”; “Do you remember which of your friends is from Mongolia?” One of my fondest memories of the apartment block where we used to live in West Hampstead was when my neighbours' children and my kids were looking at a tree together in the communal garden, and I asked each of them how to say “leaf” in their family's language. “*Feuille!*” (French)! “*Hoja!*” (Spanish) and “*Shuye!*” (Chinese) – came the chorus of replies from this wonderful group of little polyglots!

Of course, you could still help your children develop cultural awareness as a monolingual family; I would not for a moment suggest that monolingual people are inherently less culturally aware. But there is no denying that speaking more than one language does help people see things from a different perspective, which can only be a good thing.

## **5. Give your kid's brain a boost (it's scientifically proven, and it's free!)**

Nowadays, there always seems to be a new product that promises to elevate your child to the status of Baby Einstein. I once read about a mum who “trained” her newborn baby (as in, literally, one-day-old) with phonics flashcards in the hope of giving the baby a head start in the race that is modern life. Such examples abound.

Now, I'm not saying that being bilingual will make your child a genius or even more intelligent – if that were the case, all kids from, say, Malaysia (or any other country where multilingualism is the norm), would be busy making space shuttles or inventing the latest cancer cure. **It's worth remembering that *around the world, more than half of people – between 60-75% according to studies cited by the BBC<sup>iv</sup> – speak more than one language.*** This is both humbling and liberating: humbling because so many people around the world can effortlessly accomplish something that can seem so unachievable to those from a monolingual background, and liberating because if so many people around the world can do it naturally, it's actually *not such a big deal*. *There's* no reason why your child, or in fact any other average human being, cannot do it! In the Anglophone world, bilingualism/ multilingualism is so often worshipped on a pedestal, something to be admired in awe, but really, it's time to tear it down from that pedestal and bring it back down to earth. We need to demystify bilingualism/ multilingualism and re-frame it as something *normal*.

**Nevertheless, solid scientific evidence shows that knowing more than one language is beneficial for cognitive and executive functions of the brain, as bilinguals and multilinguals have to constantly juggle two or more systems in their heads.** According to cognitive neuropsychologist Jubin Abutalebi, *it is possible to distinguish bilingual people from monolinguals simply by looking at scans of their brains*, as bilinguals have significantly more grey matter than monolinguals in their anterior cingulate cortex because they are using it so much more often<sup>v</sup>. Now, I don't know about you, but I find this pretty staggering – that being bilingual or multilingual alters your brain structure in an objectively measurable way!

In recent years, the effect of bilingualism on dementia and Alzheimer's disease has also come to the forefront of public consciousness. While being bilingual doesn't prevent people from getting dementia, **numerous studies indicate that it can delay its onset by an average of five years**<sup>vi</sup>. If a “magic pill” were to have the same effect, thereby hugely improving people's quality of life over an extended period, be in no doubt that all the big pharmaceutical companies would start a fierce bidding war over it! And one can only imagine how much such a “magic pill” would cost...

And yet, *you* could give your child this gift *for free*. Why would any parent *not* want to do that?

## **6. Help your child gain a competitive edge in the future job market**

This benefit is highly relevant in today's competitive job market. **Various recent surveys show that being multilingual can improve one's earning potential by anything from 3% to as much as 15%**, by some estimates<sup>vii</sup>. Bilingual and multilingual candidates are also more likely to be hired in the first place. **The demand for bilingual talent in the US rose by 14% between 2016 and 2019**<sup>viii</sup>, as employers increasingly recognise the value of bilingual employees and actively seek out talent with language skills. In 2020, 75% of employers in the UK stated that they valued foreign language skills, particularly the ability to be bilingual<sup>ix</sup>.

This trend will likely continue in this increasingly interconnected world, making bilingualism an increasingly important asset for job seekers.

It is true that artificial intelligence will dramatically improve the efficacy and accuracy of translation software such as Google Translate, to the point where many sceptics already question the value and purpose of learning another language – what's the point if a computer can do the translation for you instantaneously, even in face-to-face interactions with a real person, as envisaged by some?

But in reality, we are probably still a long way off from that. For 99.99% of our existence as a species, we *Homo Sapiens* have evolved to interact face-to-face, using natural language. Such deeply hard-wired instincts and preferences will not be so easily displaced by technology. **As long as we're still flesh-and-blood human beings, the ability to converse naturally in another language will continue to be an extremely valuable skill.**

Many parents make huge sacrifices to give their children an expensive education, hoping it will give them a head start in life. If you could boost your child's future career prospects simply by raising them to speak more than one language and do so *for free*, why would you not do it?

## **7. Being bilingual makes it easier to learn additional languages**

Several parents have told me that they don't see the point of raising their kids to be bilingual, as their languages are too "niche" and are quite frankly not very "useful", so it's hardly worth the effort.

While this pragmatic viewpoint is understandable, these parents might have overlooked one crucial benefit of being bilingual – studies have shown that **being fluent in a second language makes it easier to learn additional languages**. In one fascinating study conducted by Professors Salim Abu-Rabia and Ekaterina Sanitsky of the Department of Special Education at the University of Haifa<sup>x</sup>, two groups of 6th-grade students in Israel were chosen to represent a sample of students studying English as a foreign language. The first group comprised 40 students who were immigrants from the former Soviet Union states, whose mother tongue was Russian and who spoke fluent Hebrew as a second language. The second group comprised 42 native Hebrew-speaking students with no fluency in another language. The first group was given tests in Russian, Hebrew and English, while the second group was given tests in Hebrew and English only.



After comparing the results of these tests, the researchers were able to conclude that *those students whose mother tongue was Russian demonstrated higher proficiency not only in the new language (English) but also in Hebrew*. The scholars noted that the fact that the Russian speakers had better *Hebrew* skills than the *native* Hebrew speakers themselves indicates that acquiring a mother tongue and preserving that language in a bilingual environment is *not* detrimental to acquiring a second language – on the contrary, **fluency and skills in one language are beneficial for the acquisition of a second language, and possessing skills in two languages can boost the learning process of a third language.** “This is because languages reinforce one another and provide tools to strengthen phonologic, morphologic and syntactic skills,” Professor Abu-Rabia explains.

**So, even if you think your language is of little practical or commercial value in the wider world, raising your child to be bilingual will equip them with the linguistic and cognitive skills to learn more “useful” languages in the future.** Why deprive them of this advantage? Besides, in today’s unpredictable world, a not-so-useful language could become much more valuable in 20 years – you just never know. An Australian-Chinese friend of mine, who resented having to go to Chinese school when she was little, spoke of her experience: “30 years ago, who would have thought that China would become the next superpower?” Now, she wishes she’d taken her Sunday classes more seriously!

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I hope this chapter has given you some food for thought and a motivational boost. You're in it for the long haul, so on those days when you want to throw that workbook out the window, when you feel like giving up, when you'd rather watch funny cat videos on YouTube for 15 minutes than sit through another homework session with your child – remember that those efforts are, at the end of the day, *so* worth it. And be assured that when your child grows up, they will be grateful for the beautiful gift of language you've worked so hard to bestow on them.

In the next chapter, I will set out the “Seven Key Principles”, which will, to a large extent, determine the success of your endeavour to raise multilingual children.

# Chapter 3

## THE SEVEN KEY PRINCIPLES

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**N**o matter which strategy (see Chapter 4 for the “Big Three” Strategies) you choose to adopt or what stage you’re currently at, the seven key principles I’ve outlined below are essential to helping your child become fluent in the target language. Let me take you through them one by one.

### 1. The Golden Equation: **BILINGUAL SUCCESS = EXPOSURE + NEED**

If you take away only *one* thing from this book, let it be this: when you strip everything down, bilingual/ multilingual success ultimately depends on two conditions being met sufficiently: **EXPOSURE** to the target language and creating the **NEED** to speak the language.

This is it. It really is as simple as that.

If you can provide your child with **1) sufficient exposure to the target language(s)** and **2) create a genuine need for your child to speak that language**, provided that your child has no developmental issues or learning difficulties, **there is absolutely no reason why they won't become fluent in your chosen target language(s)**. But *both* **conditions have to be met**. You can't just have one without the other!

Children and grown-ups alike require a vast amount of linguistic input to acquire a language, whether it's their mother tongue or additional languages. You must have heard the expression "Children are like sponges!" many times. So surely that means I can just speak to my child in the target language every now and then, or perhaps introduce a little phrase here and there, and in time, they'll just "soak it all up", right?

Wrong!

I'm sorry, but this is just wishful thinking. The truth is even sponges need to be fed. *A lot*. **Your child needs a huge amount of exposure to the target language in order to produce output.**

The next obvious question is: what constitutes "sufficient" exposure? Is it 5 hours a week? 10 hours a week? 30 hours a week? There is, in fact no consensus among experts when it comes to this pretty basic question. **You may have heard of the "30% rule" – basically, the idea is that a child needs to be exposed to a language roughly 30% of their waking time in order to become fluent in that language.** Let's say a typical child is awake for 12 hours a day. Therefore, 30% of those 12 hours would translate into **3.6 hours a day, or 25.2 hours per week.**

Of course, the “30% rule” will not be valid for everyone – people’s individual abilities and circumstances are just too variable for one rule to apply to all. However, I think it’s still a useful figure to bear in mind when planning how much exposure you need to work into your child’s routine or monitoring how much exposure they are getting.

And now, it’s time to define the term “exposure” too. **Not all kinds of “exposure” are equal** – watching an hour of cartoons in the target language is *not* the same as one hour of reading stories and chatting about their day with mummy or daddy. Children need lots of *interaction* in order to acquire a language. **In short, your child needs high-quality exposure to the target language and lots of it.**

Another thing to remember is that **you should aim to broaden your child’s sources of language exposure.** In practical terms, this means trying to give your child the opportunity to use the target language with people other than mummy and daddy in as many different settings as possible. Why is this important? Your child becomes fluent in the majority language (e.g. English) through interacting with a countless number of people on a daily basis, all of whom have their own quirks when it comes to their pronunciation, word choices, sentence patterns and so on. From this rich and varied input, your child acquires the majority language in the most natural way and is capable of understanding a wide variety of speech in that language. You want to replicate this process as closely as possible in the target language.

So, in real life, how do you go about replicating this process? **Try to make friends with other families in your area who speak your language. Explore weekend language school options. Enlist your parents' help** if you're lucky enough to have them nearby. Ideally, you want your child to really understand that mummy/ daddy is not the only one who speaks this language; that lots of other people use it too in lots of different situations.

Having said that, varied exposure is optional rather than essential. It's perfectly possible for a child to acquire a language from one source alone, i.e. their parent(s). So, if you find yourself and/or your partner to be the only source(s) of input in the target language for your child, that's absolutely fine. In that case, focus on ensuring adequate high-quality exposure to the target language for your child.

But let's say your child *is* getting a good 30 hours of high-quality exposure to the language on a weekly basis. How come they're still not speaking the language?

This was precisely the problem I ran into with Alexey. I worked part-time as a freelancer, and Alexey only went to nursery two/three afternoons a week. For at least eight hours a day, I was with him, speaking to him predominantly in Mandarin. So, why would he only talk to me in English?

Looking back on it now, I can clearly see that what was lacking was not exposure but the *need* to speak the target language. When he talked to me in English, I did respond to him mainly in Mandarin, but from his point of view, it was clear that 1) *mummy understands everything I say*; 2)

*mummy would still cater to my needs when I speak to her English.* So why on earth would he speak to me in Mandarin, which would have required so much more effort on his part at the time?

There was literally zero need for him to do it. So why would he do it? It's only with the benefit of hindsight that I now see the issues that baffled me so much back then.

**So, if your child is unable or willing to speak the target language for whatever reason, take a good hard look at these two things: exposure and need.** Have both of these conditions been met? If not, what can you do about it? In the following chapters, I'll share many tips and advice to help you create and maintain these two conditions.

## **2. The Sooner You Start, The Better (Although It's Never Too Late)**

What's the best age to start introducing a second language? The answer is simple. **The earlier, the better!** Most experts agree that the very earliest stages of language acquisition occur before a child is even born – around week 25 or 26 of pregnancy, babies in the womb have been shown to respond to voices and noise<sup>xi</sup>. One study clearly demonstrated that, in the later stages of pregnancy, unborn babies could not only differentiate their mother's voice from other people's voices but also distinguish their native language from a foreign language<sup>xii</sup>. So, babies begin to make sense of language and make their first baby steps towards speech and socialisation before they're even born. By six months of age, infants already display

preferences for phonemes (a unit of sound that can distinguish one word from another in a particular language) in their native language over those in foreign languages, and by the end of their first year no longer respond to phonetic elements peculiar to non-native languages<sup>xiii</sup>.

This is all great news if you're still planning your language strategy for an unborn child or a newborn. But what if your child is already slightly older, say two years old? Is your quest already doomed?

Do *not* despair! Even though the mantra of “The sooner you start, the better” is generally true, young children are, fortunately, extremely good at acquiring new skills, including learning languages. Opinions vary among experts, but **it is generally thought that up to the age of 10, children can acquire a new language and achieve native-like fluency and pronunciation**<sup>xiv</sup>. So please don't assume that your child is too old. I know plenty of people who started learning a new language as adults and became genuinely fluent, with minimal “foreign” accents. So, no, your four-year-old is *really* not too old. See Chapter 7 for more tips and advice on how to help your slightly older child learn a new language.

### **3. Consistency, Consistency, Consistency**

You may already have a family strategy of your own for raising your child with two or more languages (if not, please see Chapter 4 for an overview of the “Big Three” Strategies and Chapter 5 for formulating a strategy for your family). **No matter what your chosen strategy is, *stick to it*. Be consistent.** If you and your partner have decided to use the “One Parent,



One Language” strategy, then make sure that you exclusively use your language with your child and that your partner does the same. *All the time*. Or, more realistically, aim for 95% of the time (I’ll explain throughout this book why you may need to use the majority language 5% of the time). This is especially important when your child is not already fluent and you’re trying to establish the target language. Once the target language is well established – meaning that your child is fluent and consistently uses it with you – then some of these rules can be relaxed a little to allow for things like helping your child with homework in the majority language. But until you reach that stage, **it’s important to be very disciplined about using the target language consistently.**

Why is consistency so important? Again, it goes back to Principle Number One: Exposure and Need. If you’re only speaking the target language *some* of the time, not only are you effectively reducing your child’s exposure to the language, but you are also sending out a message to your child that “mummy/ daddy speaks English (or whatever your majority language is) to me” which inevitably diminishes the need to use the target language from the child’s perspective. Children (and humans in general) are smart and... lazy. All things being equal, we’ll always choose the effort-saving option. If you present an easy option (i.e. speaking English) and a difficult option (i.e. speaking the target language which at this stage still feels like a chore) to your child, which one do you think they’ll choose? **So, until it becomes *effortless* for your child to speak the target language, it’s best to err on the side of caution and avoid using the majority language as much as possible.**

#### **4. Match Your Effort and Commitment Level to Your Desired Goal**

One basic question we haven't addressed so far is the definition of "bilingual" or "multilingual". For the sake of simplicity, let's focus on "bilingual" for now. What does it mean to be "bilingual"? To some people, it means being able to speak two languages fluently, with native-like pronunciation. To others, it means being able to communicate in these languages in everyday situations. Do you have to be able to read and write like a native speaker of your second language to consider yourself "bilingual"?

Everyone would have different answers to these questions, just as every parent would have different expectations of their child and desired goals. Some parents want their children to be equally fluent and literate in both the majority and target languages (s). Some parents are happy for their child to have a passive knowledge of the target language but not necessarily be able to speak it. Some (like my husband and I) would like their child to be fluent enough to communicate in the target language and later acquire basic literacy skills at a minimum. All these goals are equally valid, and only you and your partner can decide what's necessary for your family's needs.

But here comes the tricky bit – does your effort and commitment level match your desired goal? For example, let's say on a scale of 1 to 10, you and your partner would like your child to achieve a 9 in terms of fluency and literacy in the target language – you want them to be able to speak the target language fluently, without an accent, like a native speaker, and to

have literacy skills comparable to a child of the same age who's a native speaker of the target language. This is an admirable and very ambitious goal. But you find that your child is perhaps "only" a 6 or 7 on that scale now. In most situations, they can communicate well in the target language but perhaps have a noticeable accent, or they struggle to string together more complicated sentences. They only have basic literacy skills, nowhere near comparable to a child of the same age "back home". You feel somewhat frustrated at your child's lack of progress. Chances are, the problem lies not with your child but with you (and/ or your partner): evaluate your effort and commitment level very honestly. On a scale of 1 to 10, are you operating at level 7 or 9? Are you spending enough time on literacy homework with your child? Is your child exposed to enough sophisticated language to help them express themselves more fluently and eloquently in the target language? **If you find a mismatch between your desired goal and the effort + commitment level, you need to perform some reassessment – either lower your goal or up your effort. This way, your expectations will be more realistic, and you'll appreciate rather than feel disappointed by your child's achievements.**

## 5. Establish Proper Routines and Stick to Them

Children thrive on routine.

This applies to both language acquisition and general development. In one study, researchers examined the number of daily routines that more than 8,500 children practised with their families. They found that each “ritual” – such as having family dinner together or participating in singing and reading together – was linked to a 47% increase in the odds that children would have strong emotional and social skills<sup>xv</sup>.

When it comes to language acquisition, in addition to using the target language consistently (see Principle Number Three above), I recommend that you try to incorporate a few language-related routines into the family’s daily life. **It’s vital that each routine is not too time-consuming that it feels onerous for both the child and parents; it should be something that can be easily slotted into the family’s schedule and can realistically be maintained on most days. Think short-and-sweet: a 15-minute “study” session before or after dinner, plus 15 minutes of reading at bedtime, would be a great start.** It’s much better to stick to these 15-minute routines *every day* (or at least on most days) than cram in hours of work on the odd weekend here and there.

But what do you do if you have a really busy day and cannot even fit in a 15-minute session? In that case, I suggest you do a 5-minute or even a 3-minute session rather than skip it entirely. The reason is that **every time you miss a session, it becomes easier to skip another one, and**

**another one** (anyone who has experience trying to go to the gym every day would be familiar with this scenario!) It's okay to have set days off, for example, every Sunday, or even longer breaks during holidays. **But adhering to a daily routine gives you the best chance of persevering and helps your child understand what to expect.**

You may find that your child cannot focus for 15 minutes, and that's totally normal. Children have notoriously short attention spans – a handy **rule of thumb I've come across during my research is to multiply your child's age by two, and that's the number of minutes your child can concentrate for.** For example, for a three-year-old child:  $3 \times 2 = 6$  (minutes). If your child's attention span is significantly longer than what this formula indicates, that's fantastic. But if not, adjust your routine to your child's current attention span to minimise frustration on both sides.

To maximise your chance of success, **try to do the same activity at the same time every day.** This way, it becomes automatic – everyone knows what to expect, and the routine becomes firmly embedded into the family's daily life. Our family's formal language-learning routine has evolved over the years. When our children were three or four, my husband began doing Russian homework with them for 15-20 minutes after dinner almost every day. Not long after that, I implemented a similar routine for Chinese; after a month, Alexey could already recognise about 100 characters and even read some simple sentences. These days, we sit down to “study” with the children twice a day – 30 minutes before school, and 30 minutes after dinner. The way it works is that my husband and I

alternate, so that in the morning, I study Chinese with Alina while he studies Russian/ Maths/ English with Alexey, and in the evening, we swap. Both children have thrived on this routine.

Of course, our schedule and routine will not work for every family! But remember, **you don't need to carve out a big chunk of time. 15 minutes of language homework after school, once the kids have had a snack and some rest, would be an excellent start.**

Even if you do everything right, you *will* have good days and bad days. Like us, you'll probably find that your child is more motivated and focused on some days than others, and that's totally normal. Don't feel discouraged! Just keep going and trust me, **you'll be amazed by how much you can achieve with short but consistent daily routines.**

## **6. You Reap What You Sow: Why Every Little Bit Counts**

The principle that you reap what you sow, or in other words, “you get what you put in”, is one of those maxims that hold true in all aspects of life. When it comes to your child's language learning journey, you'll inevitably encounter lots of bumps along the way, and there will be days when the tedium of reading yet another book or slogging through yet another worksheet will really get to you, and you might find yourself wondering, “what's the point?” But remember this: every little thing you do with your child today – that extra story you read together, that extra lullaby you sing at bedtime – will help your child flourish on their multilingual journey. **Always bear in mind that your child's fluency**

**in the target language will essentially be the sum total of everything they've done related to that language daily.** There *is* no shortcut. There are no magic pills or brain implants (yet). And unless you “outsource” this process to a fully bilingual school or a professional caregiver/ educator, ***you will be the one who's responsible for making the effort yourself and for creating the conditions for your child to make that effort!***

Let me give you an example to illustrate the power of taking small steps every day: the Chinese writing system is notoriously difficult to get to grips with because there's no alphabet; all Chinese children have to learn thousands of characters by rote from a young age. In reality, however, a Chinese person only needs to know 1,500 to 2,000 characters to be *legally* recognised as literate, based on China's official national literacy policy. Those 1,500 to 2,000 characters represent a basic education level that can help you make it in day-to-day life<sup>xvi</sup>. The trouble is, even 1,500 characters sounds like a heck of a lot to memorise!

But let's say you establish a 15-minute homework routine with your child starting from age five, teaching them the basics of Chinese reading and writing. I picked age five because it's more or less a happy medium – in China, children are introduced to reading and writing no later than age three, whereas in Europe, many children are not taught reading and writing until age six or above. So, OK, age five is a pretty uncontroversial age to start. And your goal is to teach your child *three* new characters a day.

I hope you'd agree that three new characters a day is a relatively realistic and modest goal. Even with my sluggish grown-up brain, I *could* memorise three new words daily if I put my mind to it! But when you multiply that by 300 days (see how generous I am here, allowing you 65 days off a year!), it already amounts to 900 characters. If you continue at that pace, your child will know 1,800 characters by age *seven*.

According to the BBC's "Mini Guide" to the Chinese language<sup>xvii</sup>, you need to know about 2,000 to 3,000 characters to be able to read a newspaper in Chinese. So, by our calculation, your child can reach this goal by about age nine. A college-educated Chinese person knows about 8,000 characters, which sounds like an intimidatingly high figure. **But if you stick to the three-character-a-day, 300-day-a-year routine, you can go from zero to 8,000 characters in 8.8 years, which means that by age fourteen, your child will know as many characters as an average college-educated Chinese person.** Obviously, I'm massively oversimplifying here – most Chinese words are made up of more than one character, and simply knowing 8,000 individual characters doesn't necessarily mean you can make sense of a newspaper article in real life. Still, I hope I've convinced you of the importance of the little steps you take every day. This is truly a wonder on par with the magic of compound interest!

So, in one word – persevere. And persevere some more.



## **7. Focus on What Your Child Can Do, Not What Your Child Can't Do**

Believe me: this small but significant adjustment in your mindset and perception will make a *huge* difference. Let me begin by admitting that I myself have at times been guilty of focusing on what my child *can't* do – more than once, I have shouted at my son in frustration because he can't remember a particular Chinese character that we've reviewed for what feels like a hundred times. What's worse – and this is a terrible confession for any parent to make – I have even called him “stupid” in moments of extreme frustration once or twice – something I swore I would *never* do, and it always made me feel terrible and tearful with guilt afterwards.

You may have experienced a similar feeling of annoyance and frustration with your child, which is totally understandable. As “wise”, knowledgeable grown-ups, it's sometimes difficult for us to understand why it's so damn hard for a child to say something correctly, or even just remember a word they've seen or heard a million times!

But every time you catch yourself thinking like this, please pause for a moment and perform a little mental switch: **instead of focusing on what your child cannot do, really try to remind yourself how much they can do, and how much they *have* achieved.** I have to constantly remind myself that, No, my son is not somehow “stupid” because he can't recite *The Three Hundred Tang Poems* by heart, a feat that apparently every preschooler in China seems capable of. He is not “stupid” for not

conjugating his Russian verbs correctly every time, as many of his Russian school friends can do.

I now tell myself that it is incredible that he can speak three languages, however imperfectly, at the age of seven. It is *amazing* that he knows hundreds of Chinese characters and can even read and write short sentences in a language he only speaks at home. **This is not about being boastful** – you don't have to shout from the rooftop, “MY CHILD CAN SPEAK THREE/ FOUR/ FIVE LANGUAGES!!!”; **this is about being rightfully proud of your child's achievements, however modest they may seem.** When you adjust your mindset like this, you will come to appreciate your child's achievements rather than feel annoyed, frustrated or worse, ashamed. Once you've flipped this mental switch, you will feel so much more positive, and this positivity will inevitably rub off on your child, creating a virtuous circle.

**So please do your best to resist the temptation of comparing your child or family to others.** At the risk of sounding clichéd, the only yardstick against which you should compare your child is your child themselves!

In the next chapter, I will take you through the “Big Three Strategies” most commonly adopted by bilingual and multilingual families, with plenty of examples showing how they work in practice.

**I hope you enjoyed the first three chapters of my book! Got value out of it and would like to read more? [Get the FULL-LENGTH book now!](#)**