

Bonus material 6.3. Language strategy

What is a language strategy and why do we need one?

The decision to bring up a child to be bilingual is the easiest part but bilingualism requires time, persistence and patience from the parents. Therefore it requires a strategy. A language strategy is a plan that allows your children to speak and learn more than one language as well as possible and in a real-life manner. Bilingualism is not just a product of learning but a lifestyle for your family.

It is a good idea for parents to learn about children's language development and consider the language environment the child will have already during pregnancy or as early as possible. Take a couple of minutes to think about how you would like your children to learn your mother tongue, why you want your children to be bilingual, what do you want to achieve and what opportunities your surroundings and social networks offer for language support. Once you have done this compare your notes. This will allow you to see the points you agree on and which may need work as you move forward.

Choosing a proper language strategy

One of the most crucial aspects of a solid language strategy is speaking your mother tongue. Speaking your own language to your child makes him or her secure, because they know which language to speak with each parent. It has been shown that only by speaking in your native language can you communicate the necessary feelings and tone to your child – particularly in the initial stages.

Finding how to include both languages in the child's life is an essential component. When thinking about how to best manage the languages of your family, try to include yourselves. For example, perhaps one partner may feel excluded if you decide on a certain language path, or the minority language might be excluded or not as widely available to the children. Only when you are both happy with the strategy will you feel comfortable implementing and utilising it.

Which strategy works best?

There is no set strategy that works for everyone, as every family is different. Therefore, the most important emphasis should be placed on your family's needs, possibilities and goals in relation to the languages spoken and the language environment. Most families adopt the strategy of each parent speaking only their native tongue to the child and then communicating as a family in whichever language they are all comfortable using.

However, certain minority languages may be easier to implement than others, and this may have an effect on how you use them and in some cases the minority language may need extra support. A family with many social contacts and opportunities to use a language outside the home probably won't need as much support when it comes to enforcing the language, at least compared to those who do not have as many contacts or who speak a language which is rarely spoken in Finland. In this case parents need to pay special attention to the language their child hears less in everyday life. Using minority language as the home language could balance the fact that the community language is Finnish, and when the minority language needs all the extra support, doing this is perfectly acceptable and even recommended.

In many intercultural families, parents also use a third language when speaking for example to each other. It does not confuse a child if parents consistently only speak their own native language to their child and this third language is used only between parents or as a home language. Some parents might themselves be bi- or multilingual and therefore need to choose or speak two languages to their child. When more than two languages are spoken, for a child to adopt these languages the same four hour a day rule per language applies. Parents also need to pay more attention on how and when they use these languages. If, for example, a third or even fourth language is spoken, then they do not have to and most probably won't be equally strong at least when children are young.

Thinking and talking about how best to devise a language strategy means you can pool your ideas and come up with a plan which perfectly suits your family. However, if something doesn't work then change it - nobody is perfect and you are allowed to make mistakes!