Learning Starts at Home: Encouraging Bilingualism and Literacy

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Educators have often told parents that using their native language at home will hurt their children's learning of English and other school subjects.
Following the teacher's advice, many parents try to use the school language in communicating with their children even though they are more comfortable in their home language.
When this happens, children seldom develop their native language skills, and they may still experience difficulty in school.
We will try to answer these questions for you in our workshop today:

- How should parents prepare their children to do well at school?
- Is it true that using the school language in the home will help children acquire that language?
- Is it worthwhile to try and promote bilingualism in the home, and, if so, how can this be done?
Will bilingualism confuse children's thinking and hurt their school progress?
A large number of research studies show very clearly that bilingualism can increase children's language abilities and help their progress in school.
However, for children to experience these beneficial effects of bilingualism, it is important that both their home and school languages continue to develop.
Children who can read/write/speak two languages have a major advantage not just in school but also in finding jobs after school.
As the United States becomes even more culturally diverse, this is going to be a very big advantage for your child when he/she becomes an adult.
Unfortunately, in the past, many children did not develop reading and writing skills in their native language because there was no native language instruction in the school.
In fact, children were often punished for speaking their home language in the school and were made to feel ashamed of it.
Under these conditions, bilingual children often experienced difficulties at school and felt that they had to reject their home culture and language in order to be part of the broader society.
Educators tended to blame these children's school failures on bilingualism itself rather than on the way the school treated children.
This is why well-meaning educators still sometimes believe that bilingualism causes confusion in thinking and that parents should use as much English as possible.
These educators are quite simply **WRONG.**

Their advice to parents to use English in the home can lower the quality of communication between parents and children.
This in turn can have very detrimental effects of children's development since there is strong evidence that quality and quantity of communication in the home provides children with the basis for performing well in school.
In summary, bilingualism is associated with educational difficulties only when

- children come to school without a good foundation in their first language
- the home language is not promoted in the school.
When parents actively develop the home language, children come to school with the necessary foundation for acquiring high levels of reading and writing skills in the school language.
Research shows that bilingual children with high levels of proficiency in both languages consistently perform better than monolingual children do on both linguistic and educational tasks.
In essence, the better the children's home language is developed, the more successfully they acquire high levels of English educational skills.
How can parents lay the foundations for school success and home language development?
Language is learned primarily through communication with other people.

Research shows that the more communication children experience at home the better developed their language skills will be.
Children need to talk well in order to learn well. This is especially important for the development of native language skills since the language is seldom reinforced by the child's environment outside school.
However, the **quality** of communication is just as or more important than **quantity** alone.

The language adults use helps children become aware of the many different aspects of objects and events around them.
For example, during a shopping trip to the market or store, adults can develop children's concepts by bringing their attention to the shapes, colors, sounds, textures, and size of objects and events around them.
Parents can do this naturally through conversation without explicit teaching.

In other words, conversation with children in everyday situations expands their minds and develops their thinking skills.
Parents can also ask their children to tell them about what they are learning in school.
Even when parents have limited schooling themselves, doing these kinds of things helps the development of children's first language skills.
In addition to conversing with children, adults can help prepare their children to succeed in school by encouraging them to take an active interest in books and in the print that surrounds them in the environment (e.g., signs, posters, labels).
The child's first major task in school is learning to read.
Children who come to school with knowledge that the print around them carries important meanings and with an interest in books and stories will usually succeed in learning to read rapidly.
Parents can promote this knowledge and interest either by reading or telling their children stories in the home language.
After children have learned some reading skills, parents can encourage their children to read them stories (in either the home or school language).
This "sharing of literacy" between adults and children in the home both before and during the school years appears to play an important part in laying a strong foundation for children's success in literacy.
It is important for young children to look at pictures in books and listen to stories with their parents.
These activities are most successful when parents use the language that comes most naturally to them.
Bilingual teachers, English as a Second Language (ESL) teachers, and librarians can help provide suitable books in the home language for parents to read to their children or for the children to read.
Local libraries often have story hours for young children.

Many libraries have story hours in Spanish and other languages common to families in the community.

Principals and teachers can help make parents aware of these services.
Parents can help their children do well at school by talking to them, by pointing out and explaining things to them, by telling them stories, and by reading stories to them.
As a result, these family activities promote communication, develop children's bilingualism, and help build a solid foundation for doing well in school.
The End
Thanks for coming!
The CPELL Team

Adapted by Sue Wagner, 2001 and Elizabeth Vera, 2009