

Elternbrief Englisch / Parent's Letter
How can our child learn 2 languages,
German and our own language?



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Dear parents,

Perhaps you sometimes ask yourselves
“How is our son or our daughter learning German?” or
“Can our child learn two languages at an early age? or may be
“Will our child be able to express himself/herself well later in school?”



Many parents ask these questions. Many educators and scholars have studied these issues. We should like to offer you some information and a few helpful hints concerning these questions. What do children need in order to develop their full linguistic potential?

- **It is easy for a child to learn more than one language**

If your child grows up speaking two different languages, for instance speaking one language at home and another one in kindergarten, your child has a great chance for his/her future. Research has shown, that *children are able to learn two (or more) languages at an early age as long as they are actively supported in both languages.*

If father and mother speak different languages, then each parent may speak in his or her own language with the child. Children have no problem coping with that. However, in this case clear guidelines are important, such as: one person - one language. That way a child knows Mum speaks this way, and Dad speaks that way, and during lunchtime “we speak this way....”

- **Kindergarten is a chance for your child**

In kindergarten your child learns German and many other things which are important for the development of language (and later for school). Kindergarten offers your child a great chance, so it is advisable that your child starts kindergarten early (e.g. from three years on) and then attends regularly. This means that your child has enough time to learn German before entering primary school. *The kindergarten teachers actively promote the German language with games, conversations, songs, nursery rhymes, picture books and stories.* In the beginning, if a child does not speak any German at all, he/she will probably try to find friends in kindergarten who speak the same language as at home. This will help the child to get used to being in kindergarten and to feel comfortable. You can be sure that, later on, the child will also find German friends.

- **Which language do you speak with your child?**

In the past and sometimes even today, non German-speaking parents were advised to speak German with their child so that the child would have an easier time in school. This is not very good advice. *With your own child you should use the language which comes naturally to you, the language which you speak best – and that is usually your native language.* This is the language in which you know the most words - and you also know how the sentences are “constructed”. This is very important for your child – *with such a foundation at an early age,* he/she will have an easier time learning German later. It takes many years until a child speaks a language really well – this is true for the first language, but also for all other languages a child might learn.

At some period children may want to speak German only, and you’ll find that they answer in German even within the family. Again, this is quite normal and usually a passing phenomenon. If you yourself remain consistent and continue speaking in your own language with your child and if your child continues hearing that language from others, then you don’t

have to worry that your child might forget his/her native language. The day will come when your child will use that language again.

- **What can you do to help your child?**

The family is very important for language development because children learn their first language within the family. If children feel at home in their first language and have a chance to use it as much as possible, then learning German and learning in school will be easier. What can you do to support the linguistic development of your child?

- **Talking and telling stories**

You cannot train language; language develops on a daily basis with young children - for instance, when they listen to other children and when they speak themselves; language develops when children play or when they look at picture books, it develops at meal times or in conversations with people the children love. *Daily conversations with your children are very important*: tell your child as much as he/she understands about your job, about his/her grandparents, or about something that happened to you during the day. Let your child share in your own activities – when you are cooking, for instance, you could tell the child what you are putting into the pot. It is a good sign if your child asks you many questions and tells you things – e.g. what made him/her angry or happy that day, what his/her friends had to say, etc. In this way your child gradually learns to express himself.

Children learn best when they feel at home and when they are not afraid of making mistakes. Sometimes children will invent words or sounds, they enjoy doing this. It is not good for your child's linguistic development if you constantly correct "wrong" expressions. There is a danger that children who get corrected all the time will no longer enjoy expressing themselves.

There are certain activities which are particularly suited to develop your children's linguistic potential to the fullest – e.g. reading to your children, telling stories, sharing picture books, singing songs or teaching them nursery rhymes.

- **Sharing picture books with your child**

For the development of language it is very important that parents look at picture books with their children, if possible every day. Research has shown that sharing picture books with a child and talking about the pictures (in your own language) teaches the child many different things, which will help him/her in all other languages and later in school.

When sharing picture books it is important

- that both the adult and the child find it enjoyable (too many questions may spoil the fun for your child)
- that the child is free to talk as much as he/she wants to about the pictures and the story – anything that occurs to him

If picture books in your own language are not available locally, here is what you can do: There are many picture books in German with relatively little text, consisting mostly of pictures. You could borrow such books from your local library or from the kindergarten library. You could also ask the teacher for advice, he/she will be happy to help you. You could take such books home and talk to your child in your own language about the pictures – together with your child you could invent a story to go along with the pictures. Your child could also borrow a book from kindergarten and talk to you about the pictures (in German or in your home language). You will also find that nowadays some libraries stock bi-lingual books.

Your child may have a favourite book, which you are supposed to read over and over again – this is good because it's the way children develop a love for books.

➤ **A story every night**

Most children love stories. The more stories children hear from their parents or other relatives, the more they will develop their language. Listening to stories helps children understand stories. It also enables them to tell a story, which is an important skill that they will need later in school. There is no limit to these stories; they can be about daily life, fairy tales, or stories from your own childhood – anything that you and your child enjoy sharing. How about a story every night?

Other items important for linguistic development are: songs, games, and nursery rhymes. Most children enjoy them. Do you remember nursery rhymes and songs from your childhood?

➤ **Watching TV is not enough**

When children watch TV, they usually concentrate on the pictures rather than on the words. And, in general, they watch without speaking. Thus, TV is not very conducive to language development. Children learn much more when listening to a fairy tale on an audiocassette or – even better - to a story told by their parents.

➤ **Growing up with two languages – children need role models**

Parents are important role models for a child. Some children notice how their parents are trying to learn German. For instance, parents might ask their children about a word in German or parents might be enrolled in a language course in the kindergarten. This is helpful for children. It will make them proud and eager to learn German themselves. Children also notice whether their parents appreciate and keep up their own native language and whether they value bilingualism.

Language is a treasure...

Children who grow up speaking two languages possess a treasure which will greatly help them in life. No one can take this treasure away.

We wish you and your child a rewarding and successful future