



Every Child Is Different: ONE LANGUAGE, TWO OR THREE?

The chairs are so small! But I'll be able to make due for one evening, thinks Lea, as she squeezes between three other mothers and takes a seat at a miniature table. Colourful cardboard dragons dangle over her; there are chocolate cookies in front of her. It is the first parent evening in the new daycare centre year; ten mothers and four fathers have come. Some are already familiar with it. Others, like Lea, are completely new. She furtively takes a look at the faces around her: Who belongs to which child? Who could she befriend? After all, her daughter Isabel is going to spend the next three years here, so she will be having a few cups of coffee with the parents of Isabel's little friends.

The teachers Paula and Christiane have stacked various folders, picture cards, brochures and toys in front of them. Lea reads "language-learning diary," "language-learning case," "educational programme": This evening the main topic is supposed to be language – and how children's linguistic skills can best be encouraged. But first it is time for the introductory round, and that already makes it clear that it's not an easy subject.

Timo's parents Anita and Holger both have German as their native language; as teachers, they can easily take turns caring for their child in the afternoon. Timo also has a big brother as well as two grandmothers and one grandfather who enjoy taking care of the children. Every evening, stories are told. At the dinner table, there is talking, reading and playing – the parents do not have to worry about their sons' linguistic development. But Timos's mother still wants more stimulation: "At exactly this age Timo could so easily learn another language. Why isn't English taught here? Won't it be too late for Timo to first learn English at school?"

Mike does not have this problem: He is Australian, his wife is German, their daughter Nelly is being raised bilingual. "I speak English with her, Maria speaks German with her. It works well, but since Nelly has been going to daycare, she no longer answers in English. She only wants to speak German, because her friends speak German – I think that is a pity."

A woman with long black hair is sitting next to Mike. She speaks fluent German with a slight accent. "My twins previously went to a different daycare centre. We took them out, because there were too many Turkish children in the group who only spoke Turkish with one another. We want our children to learn German too! So far we have spoken Turkish with them at home, but I meanwhile ask myself: As parents, shouldn't we speak German with them so that before they start school they learn it well?" Shahnaz, who runs a Persian restaurant with her husband, has similar thoughts. "I have the feeling Ferhad is neither learning German nor Farsi properly – he makes mistakes in Farsi which kids his age should no longer make. And I can't even correct the mistakes he makes in German. My German isn't good enough."

The daycare centre is the ideal place to learn languages

After everyone else has introduced themselves, Paula, the teacher, rises to speak. She is used to having children with a wide variety of native languages in her groups: monolingual, bilingual and even trilingual. Finally, there are also German children who need special linguistic help: Josephine is extremely shy and prefers to quietly play alone. Marko, whose parents aren't here this evening, is in a really difficult situation: His father is very sick and has to go to hospital a lot, his mother often works the night shift and because of the father's problems, hardly has time to take care of the boy. Marco is often aggressive and throws swearwords around.

But he also withdraws a lot and doesn't say much. At the daycare centre, he has to learn to express himself with words and that conflicts can also be settled through discussion.



Paula and Christiane first show the parents how they encourage the children's linguistic skills: for example, with water. With water? Yes, because the next big project is entitled "water": The children will experiment with water, go on a boat trip, make music with water bottles, draw fish... At first glance, that does not have much to do with language. But at second glance, it has a lot to do with it: water can "flow," "bubble," "spray," "spill over," "gurgle." Water is found in "puddles," "streams," "rivers," "lakes" and "oceans." Water is used for "washing," "cleaning," "drinking," "rinsing" - with a project like that, there are a lot of opportunities for Christiane and Paula to introduce new words. "Ferhad, for example, refers to everything that swims in water as fish," says Christiane to his mother. "After the water project he will know: there are goldfish, trout, sharks, whales, dolphins and a lot of other animals in the water. And they don't only have to be 'small' or 'large,' but 'tiny' or 'giant' too." It doesn't matter if he first makes mistakes and says "die Wal" ("der Wal" is correct for whale) or "ich springe in Bach" ("ich springe in den Bach" is the correct way to say "I am jumping into the stream"): the more often he hears the words spoken correctly the sooner he will start using them correctly.

In all of Germany's federal states, the daycare centres have educational programmes. These projects play a major role because they impart many skills at once. The kids playfully learn a lot about the world. They have their first natural science experiences and talk about them. Stories, songs, rhymes or games accompany just about every topic.

And the more meaning words are imbued with, the more easily children learn them: A child who full of enthusiasm once made a trout by hand, or drew one or - even better - held one in his or her own hands or saw one swim in a river doesn't easily forget the word "trout." And the child who knows the song "Jahresuhr" ("Year Clock") by heart remembers the names of the months more easily.

Language is learned by speaking

"The main thing for language support," says Paula, "is speaking." There's a difference if while having breakfast together the teacher only asks "Taste good?" and gets an "mmh" back - or if she says: "Do the bread rolls taste good?" "Look, today Amin has strawberries with him." or "What is on your bread today?" Paula and Christiane try to name objects as frequently as possible and to speak in complete sentences. In other words, not: "Give it to me," but: "Please give me the red cardboard"; not: "Stop!" but: "Please stop throwing the cars around." They try to enter into a conversation with the kids: "What are you doing right now?" "What did you find there?" And at the "morning circle," they encourage the kids to talk about what they have been doing.



The two teachers also have teaching aids to help the children practice: For example, Paula's "language-learning case" contains over a hundred picture cards with pictures of everyday objects, animals, buildings, etc. "We recently went to the zoo," says Paula. "Beforehand, we worked with picture cards and on naming the various animals. When we got there, the children, could see the animals they previously only knew from photos. When I asked 'What is this animal called,' they all raced to say 'That is a wolf, a bear, an elephant!...'"

Christiane likes working with picture books: "When I read out loud, unknown words often pop up. For some words like 'mermaid' it suffices to show the picture in the book and to then again explain what it is. Other words like 'bitter cold' or 'she is panic-stricken' are hard to draw. I try to explain what this means in different terms or have the older children describe what it means." She recently told the children a fairy tale. "And when no one knew what a "witch's hump" was, I simply acted it out. Suddenly all of the children made a 'witch's hump' and called out the word."

The teachers record the children's linguistic development in the "language-learning diary." The teacher and child fill the language-learning diary together - with small interviews, pictures and observations: (when) can the child write his or her name, listen attentively over a certain period of time,



pronounce sounds correctly, make and understand generic terms, repeat stories, and so on? That is all preserved. That way children, parents and teachers can understand what improvements have been made; weaknesses can be recognized and remedied early, and strengths can be encouraged more. Right on time before the start of school, many federal states hold a language-level survey, which establishes how well children understand words, sentences and stories and can come up with them on their own. If needed, the kids are then also tutored on an individual basis.

All languages are valuable

Christiane and Paula place special emphasis on one point: All languages children bring from home are important and valuable. In her current group alone, there are seven: English, Turkish, Farsi, Russian, Polish, Croatian and German. The teachers themselves only speak German, English and a few words of Russian; perhaps they will soon also have a Turkish colleague. But the way things are they are also able to increase the children's interest in various languages. During the morning circle, the children taught each other to say "good morning" in their various native languages; it is fun for them to greet one another like that. Christiane likes reading fairy tales from different countries out loud and then asking the children what the word for "wolf" or "cat" is in their languages: That way the children experience themselves as experts who know more than the others – even if they might not be that confident in German. They tell what they did on holiday in their parents' home country and bring photos with them. That benefits everyone: German children often surprise their parents with how much they already know about other countries.



Paula and Christiane can say from experience: A child who grows up with a different family language can in kindergarten learn the basic structures of the German language within a year if the child has enough social interaction with German-speaking children and has attentive teacher assistance. The child will initially only say individual words, for example, "book" for "I would like to have the book" – very similar to what children with German as their native language do at the beginning of speech development. After six to twelve months, kids from families with a different native language master simple sentences, and at the end of a kindergarten year, they can also say and understand complex sentences, roughly as well as their German classmates. For that to happen the parents do not have to start speaking German at home – it suffices to speak the language they speak best and feel best in.

But it is very important that they support the child in the learning of German as a second language: not by drilling them on German vocabulary, but, above all, by giving the child the feeling that the German language is important, that it is fun to communicate in it. And that works best if the children have as much contact as possible, also privately, with German-speaking children.

At any rate, parents should not expect their children to become "perfectly" bilingual – that is the case for Ümit, the Turkish mother of twins, as well as for Mike, the Australian father, and Iranian Shahnaz. A perfect bilingualism does not exist in the sense that a person speaks both languages equally well in every situation, can name everything and every feeling equally well and quickly. If little Ferhad only does handicrafts with cardboard, paper, string and glue in kindergarten, then his "handicraft vocabulary" will be more certain in German than in Farsi. If little Nelly speaks German all day with her mother and her friends, then she will understand her father's English, but not answer him in English – or not as well as she would in German. Nevertheless, it is important that her father continues to speak English with her.

Paula likes to put it this way: The two languages with which a child grows up are like two friends who accompany the child lifelong. Sometimes the child is closer to the one friend, sometimes to the other. The big advantage for people who grow up with two languages is that they can easily improve the weaker language by, for example, going on trips abroad.

How parents can encourage their children

Parents are not language teachers. They do not have to practice any words with their children and do not have to ask them to properly repeat sentences. But they can make sure that a lot is told in the family, that there is a lot of talking and listening going on. And that means: The child experiences that the parents enjoy speaking with one another and with friends. The parents let their children express themselves – even if the youngest perhaps still speaks very slowly and awkwardly.

The parents are happy when the children ask questions and try to respond in an intelligible way. They also ask the kids questions, tell stories, read out loud, explain unknown words to them, sing with them, connect games with language ("I see what you don't see, it starts with A").

Children inherently delight in words, sounds, rhymes and language games – to maintain and encourage this joy is not only a good basis for their later schooling, but can also be a lot of fun for the parents. After all, when in life does one have the opportunity to hear so many interesting neologisms? "There is a 'Raucherdackel' (literally 'smoking dachshund')" says Lucas – meaning the neighbour's "Rauhaardackel" (wire-haired dachshund). But it's too bad the animal can't always be called that!

Television does not help much with language learning, because children cannot quickly understand how the images and words follow each other. They also cannot start a conversation with the television: The screen is simply not an interlocutor which apprehends the child's utterances, repeats the child's words and answers questions, which takes a child into its arms while speaking, and praises it for its responses ... But in daily life, that all takes place very easily and as a matter of course, in the kitchen, in the child's room – or, particularly cosy, on the sofa with a picture book.

School is starting soon – what children learn by then

During the daycare years, children's vocabulary grows quickly, because they learn about a lot of new areas in life and hear new words from their playmates and teachers. In German, they master complex sound combinations like bl-, fr-, kn-, tr- with increasing certainty, while the sibilants are difficult for them (s, ss, sch, z, x), which they can first often pronounce confidently and clearly at a school age. Between ages three and six, children's ability to build sentences also develops in tremendous leaps. All kids go through the same steps regardless of whether they grow up with the German language at home or not. They have already left the initial "two-word sentences" (Papa away, Mama auto) behind them at a daycare centre age. Now they are primarily building main clauses ("You are sweet," "My granny is coming tomorrow").

A feature of German is that in certain sentence constructions the subject-verb sequence is reversed: That means "Ich gehe nach Hause/I go home" but "Morgen gehe ich nach Hause" (literally translates as "Tomorrow go I home"); "Du möchtest ein Eis/You would like an ice cream," but "Möchtest du ein Eis?/Would you like an ice cream?" Children who grow up with a different family language often have problems with this reversal. They say sentences like „Morgen ich gehe nach Hause" which should reverse the subject and verb and be "Morgen gehe ich nach Hause" for "Tomorrow I go home." If they have enough contact with the German language, and their teachers or parents correct errors like that in passing ("genau, morgen gehst du nach Hause"/literally translates as "Exactly, tomorrow go you home"), they will in the course of time use the correct syntax. Children who have German as their native language also still make mistakes until they are of school age: Sentences like "Du hast meinen Ball weggenommen!" should be "Du hast meinen Ball weggenommen!" for "You took my ball away!" and are no grounds for concern but instead show that the children have a grip on the basic structure of German grammar.

Dependent clauses are the highest level in sentence formation: "Ich spiele nicht mit, weil ich das Spiel nicht kenne/I am not playing, because I do not know the game"; "wenn du nicht mitkommst, bin ich nicht mehr deine Freundin/If you do not come along, I will no longer be your friend." At age five or six, most children can now also form dependent clauses, which are introduced with "bevor/before", "nachdem/after" and "obwohl/although," and they can tell entire stories. Even so, these stories are often not easy to understand, because the children regard important information as self-evident and do not include it. The adults have to ask in return: Who just did that? Who did he give that to? Why? Questions like that are important for the child: while speaking, children learn to properly engage with their listeners and what their listeners know.

Speak with parents – speak for parents

Lea slides back and forth on her small chair, her bones already hurt – but an important point in the agenda still needs to be addressed. "We still have to select parent representatives," says Christiane. As single parent, Lea does not want to take on yet another responsibility and hopes others will be willing to do it. Perhaps Timo's mother or Leo's father? Parent representatives, that means parent speakers, and that also has to do with language: She sees Timo's mother raise her hand. But to Lea's surprise she does not suggest herself, but Shahnaz. And after a brief hesitation, Shahnaz also accepts: She sees it as the opportunity to learn a little more about what is going on at the daycare centre. And since she likes putting people in touch with one another, Shahnaz is certain she can bring the very different parents in this group into dialog with one another. Shahnaz suggests organizing a daycare centre party, which all parents should contribute to with food. Unanimously accepted! Shahnaz would like to directly speak to the parents who did not come to the parent evening, because she thinks they will react more openly to the subjects "party" and "food" than to the catchword "parent evening." Lea recalls: Hasn't her daughter Isabel already frequently mentioned little Gökçe whose mother isn't present today? Perhaps she should invite Gökçe to her home? Then she can also introduce herself to her mother. Perhaps she would then be more likely to come to the daycare centre party if she already knew one of the women. She decides to do it. Because one thing is certain: The more the parents speak with one another, the better the children will learn to speak with one another.

Supporting children linguistically – some tips

As easy as it is valuable: Speak a lot with your child! Use the opportunities offered on the street or at home to name things and talk about them.

- *Use a lot of different words (in other words, not only: "Look at the bird there," but "Look there is a blackbird, a magpie, a crow").*
- *Listen attentively and patiently to your child; your child should have fun speaking and not feel rushed.*
- *Express interest in your child's questions and answer them clearly and intelligibly: The child then notes how worthwhile it is to speak, question and exchange information.*
- *Tell stories or read them out loud – in the process your child learns new words and finds enjoyment in listening, his or her imagination develops.*
- *Sing songs with your child – language itself is a type of music and you remember texts better if they are connected with music.*
- *If your child grows up with a different native language: Make sure your child has a lot of contact with German-speaking children; give your child the feeling that learning German is important and valuable; talk with the teacher about what your child has already learned and where the child still needs support and encouragement.*

More information about speech development and multilingualism can be found on the following websites:

www.dbl-ev.de (Deutscher Bundesverband für Logopädie)
www.zweisprachigkeit.net
www.cplol.eu/eng/posters.htm

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