

Raising Multilingual Children 2021

[Start of recorded material at 00:00:00]

Lorrie: We're just about ready for me to welcome you all to our event tonight. Before we start, we just like to do our acknowledgement. Wyndham City Council recognises Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as the First Custodians of the lands on which Australia was founded. Council acknowledges the peoples of the Kulin Nation as the Traditional Owners of the lands on which Wyndham City is being built. We pay respects to the wisdom and diversity of past and present Elders. We share commitment to nurture future generations of Elders in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

It gives me great pleasure to introduce our guest tonight, Lisa Decker. Lisa Decker is a local speech pathologist in Wyndham who practices from the Well Said Clinic. She will share some wonderful tips on raising children in more than one language. Welcome Lisa.

Lisa Decker: Thank you very much everyone and I'm just going to open up my slideshow. Welcome everybody and had I done this a while ago I would've been saying how awesome for you to come out and in this wild and woolly weather to come and hear this talk on raising multilingual children. But I'm hoping you're kicking back, cup of tea, hot chocolate, something else and that you are ready for, I hope what will be an interesting and information providing presentation on this fairly complex question.

My name is Lisa Decker as Lorrie and Mica have said and I am a local speech pathologist. I have been a speech pathologist for 38 years and when I say that number, I think to myself "Oh my goodness where has all the time gone." And for all of those 38 years I have lived and worked in the western suburbs and to be honest I wouldn't live and work anywhere else.

Here's what we're going to go through tonight. Here's our content. We're going to go through a little bit of statistics and some definitions so that you know what I'm talking about. The role of parents and you have a very important role. Overview of possible problems and then we'll have time at the end of the presentation to answer any questions that you might have.

I want to reassure everybody that you as a parent have all the necessary skills you need to help your children develop all the language skills they need and to become a speaker of multiple languages whether it's bilingual or multilingual you have all those skills. And I know over many many years of working that parents for whom English is not their first language are often very concerned about whether they have the correct and appropriate skills. But I want to reassure you, yes you do.

We're going to talk about some definitions so that you're very clear about what I understand by this of being multilingual, of what receptive language

is, of what expressive language is. Pragmatic language, articulation and I'm going to add some definitions to primary and secondary languages.

Being multilingual by its very definition means to understand and/or maybe talk in either spoken, manual and by manual, I mean sign language or in a written form at least a functional level of language. And by that, I mean you have the ability to understand what somebody is saying to you, and you have the ability to express your thoughts and ideas in that language. As a monolingual person I must say I'm incredibly envious of anyone who speaks more than one language. But I want to tell you that language acquisitions, so acquiring another language can occur at any age. Of course, as you would expect the older you are the more complex that becomes and the more challenging. I can honestly tell you that I learned Japanese up to HSC or what was HSC but up to VCE level and over the past 38 or 40 years I haven't used any Japanese and so I would not say that I was by any stage have an ability to speak in Japanese.

There are two types of timings for acquiring language. One is what we call simultaneous. This is when, and it often occurs in very young childhood where more than one language is learnt at the same time. So, it typically occurs in those first year or two of life. Sequential language acquisition basically means you're learning one language first and then you learn subsequent languages after you've acquired that. And what the research tells us is this typically occurs after three years of age. When language is acquired at that point and as we get older it often becomes a translation. You think in one language, and you translate in another, but we'll come, and we'll talk more about that in a little while.

Just, we're going briefly go through these definitions. Receptive language is the ability to understand. It is understanding vocabulary, it's understanding sentence structure. It is understanding story level and conceptual level language. It includes skills like short term auditory memory and comprehension. It is a very important skill to have when you are learning a new language.

Expressive language is exactly what you would think it would be. It is the ability to talk, produce, express thoughts and ideas by using vocabulary, sentence structure and it is used on a day-to-day basis.

Pragmatic language and we won't be covering much of this today but just for your interest sake pragmatic language is the ability to use language and to follow the rules of engagement in a social context. So, by that slide as it tells you it is how you change your tone of voice when you're making a point. How you interpret non-verbal pieces of information such as body language and facial expression and how you understand the social rules of conversation. And by the social rules I mean this, when Australian English people speak, they are often looking directly at each other and waiting for the other person to speak. I'm aware that in some indigenous, some of our indigenous cousins they will often look down and look away and for some people they see this as a sign of rudeness but in fact that's treating their

listener with respect. So, there's all sorts of hidden rules when we engage with someone using social language.

Articulation is different. Articulation is the ability to use speech sounds of our language. So, it's the ability to produce those sounds by moving our lips and our tongue and produce them accurately and in the correct sequence.

This is where we become more interesting. Primary language can also be referred to as first language, native language. Some researchers and people use heritage language or mother-tongue. All of these things refer to the same thing. Often in terms of research it refers to the language that you are raised in but later in life it can also be referred to as the language that you use predominantly. For example, if your first language was Greek and you learned Greek first but then you started to use English predominantly English may be considered your primary language whereas Greek might be considered your first or heritage language.

A secondary language are the languages that we learn after that first one. And often, and I'll certainly going to be talking more about this as we progress through our talk today, the primary language is a very very important language because it provides the foundation skills for acquiring the second, third and fourth languages for some people and we will be talking more about that because that is the reason we're here. How do we raise multilingual speakers, and our primary language is of prime importance? Just harking back to that I am going to be using the term primary language because as a speech pathologist that's how we describe it, but I am actually talking about first, native and heritage languages or mother-tongue unless I say differently just to be clear.

What I want to say to you is that speech and language skills for all children develop in a typical sequence. However, every child will progress through those sequences at potentially different rates, and they may need to spend more time at a certain level before they move onto the next level. An example I will give you is that typically between 12 months and 18 months of age children will start to acquire between 30 to 50 words. This is a neurotypical or typically developing child. From about 18 months, give or take, they will start to put those words together. The proviso is though that they actually have the 30 to 50 words. Now some children might take 12 months to acquire those 30 to 50 words and they're not likely to start putting words together in short phrases until they've got those words.

I don't want to hone too much on that six-month age limit, it is absolutely give and take. And for a variety of different reasons children will develop at different paces. But what I do want to really impress upon you all is that learning one language will not, will not impact how early a child speaks or how quickly they go through those stages. And that is one question that I'm as a speech pathologist often asked about whether a parent should continue to speak in their primary language or should start to hone more on English. I'm going to say it again because it's really important to

remember. Learning more than one language will not cause a delay in acquiring English or subsequent languages. And I'm going to explain to you a little bit more why.

As I said just a minute ago there are a number of stages and just for your interest Step 1 is what we call the Prelinguistic or Pre-production stage. This is young children in infants starting to learn to understand the language of their environment whether that's one language, two or three they still go through this same phase. Early Production is that you start to see the appearance of those single words. Speech Emergence there is an ongoing increase of vocabulary and as I said starting to put short phrases, two or three words together. As the children get older, we start to see a further increase in vocabulary and then slowly elongating the number of words and sentences that they use until they reach Advanced Fluency and then at that point they're talking like, for want of a better term mini adults. So, they're starting to converse.

The reason you're all here tonight and the reason I was really keen on doing this talk is that I really wanted to impress upon you that children who are raised in a home where there is more than one language should have an opportunity to practice both or all languages. In fact, a few years ago there was a human rights charters that said, "Every child has a right to speak the language of their heritage" and it's something that I certainly subscribe to and it's something that the research is telling us is an important step in language acquisition.

Having said that the other additional importance of primary language is that the development of that first primary heritage language or mother-tongue provides the base upon which other languages are learned and therefore is not only beneficial but extremely important for the efficient development of those other languages. In fact, some research articles say for typically developing children that their cognitive skills are enhanced and potentially their learning skills are enhanced because they've had this ability to acquire these other languages.

Again, as I said I'm going to add a little bit of statistics, 2016 was the latest ones I could find, and it basically said that 21 percent of Australians speak a language other than English. In Melbourne that increases up to 32 percent of people who speak languages other than English but in the wonderful shire of Wyndham it goes up to 40 percent. So, you can see why this is such an important topic of conversation to have with the parents of our community so that they have a clear understanding of what it is they need to do to help their children. This is particularly so as I am fully aware that there are a number of people, friends, relatives, other professionals who are very happy to share with you their knowledge of why it is or is not important to be multilingual. We need to basically set the record straight. We need to make sure that people have a very clear understanding of what is correct information and what is myth. And what is misinformation because there is so much of that about. And of course, these statistics were 2016, I have absolutely no doubt that we have become far more

multicultural and diverse in our community than we were in 2016.

Currently the mix of cultures that we currently see in Wyndham and there are obviously more than these ones, but these are the predominant ones. Australia is by large the largest proportion, then we have our wonderful Indian cultures and Indian residents. Followed quickly by New Zealanders, hello to all New Zealanders out there. Then comes people from the Philippines, our Chinese community and then English, and by English, I mean people from England.

Again, from the census we see that languages other than English include Mandarin, Italian, Cantonese, Punjabi, Tagalog or Filipino, Greek, Vietnamese, Arabic, Hindi and Sinhalese. It's interesting to note that when I was doing some research to prepare our talk tonight one of the things that was highlighted in our research is that unlike countries like the US or Canada, Australia has a broad mix of cultures and languages that are spoken. Whereas places like the US they have a very dominant other language which as it says there is Spanish and in Canada the other dominant primary language is French. Whereas we have that diverse mix of different languages which makes us the most wonderfully culturally diverse language on the earth.

Now because there are so many languages parents raise a lot of concerns about how they should be raising their children. These are some of the questions that I'm hoping to answer tonight and if you have any others please don't hesitate to include those in the chat so that we can address them at the end of the session.

What can I do to help my child speak our mother-tongue? Will my child be able to speak English the same as other children? Should I stop speaking my first language? And this is often a question that comes to me that other people have suggested that parents do stop speaking their first language. I'm going to go into this more detail but I'm going to say the answer is no, you should not stop speaking your first language, no you should not stop speaking your first language. Will the use of multiple language cause delays or academic difficulties? Will my child be successful at school? These are some really common questions that are often raised by parents.

At what age do you start speaking, absolutely from birth. If any of you are hesitating that's when you should start speaking your primary language, as soon as they arrive. Now, some people might look at you as if you're crazy, but it is those first months that become very important in developing that what we call the reciprocity, that back and forth conversation with your child. And it sets the scene and provides the foundation for later language development. And what you'll find parents, fathers and mothers, will often instinctively simplify their language to make it easier for their infants and children to understand. You'll often see people increase their pitch and lower their volume and these are all instinctive strategies to help your child understand what you're saying.

Here's where it becomes very important about the primary language. If you are skilled in more than one language, you follow the same routine in both languages. So, the research tells us that typically developing children begin to learn multiple languages just by listening to them prior to the time they start to talk. If you remember those stages, that pre-linguistic, pre-production stage and it's often under one or under 18 months they are learning the language of their environment, the language or languages. This next part is a really important point. If parents are only skilled in their primary language it is advised that they use this language only and this is particularly true, and I'm going to explain to you why but I'm going to repeat that again. If you are very skilled at your first language, so say for example you're very skilled at Mandarin but your English is by nowhere as well developed only speak in Mandarin for those first years. And I know that might feel counterproductive but it's an important skill to provide your child with the ability to listen to a skilled speaker.

Now, an added piece of information, there are 7,000 primary languages and dialects worldwide and they are made up of a combination or differing combinations of 800 sounds. Each language uses around 40 sounds and these sounds help us to distinguish different languages. A piece of trivia, all children who start to babble, babble a range of sounds, both sounds within their own environment but sounds that they don't hear, and all children do this no matter where they're raised. An English-speaking baby will babble the same as a Chinese speaking baby will babble the same as an Arabic baby or the same as a Vietnamese baby. What will happen though as they listen to the language of their environment, very gradually sounds get weeded out and they remain with the sounds of the language that they hear. So, we know that infants and toddlers can distinguish different sounds which is how they start to weed out unfamiliar sounds and sounds that they don't hear regularly.

I'm sure you are all wanting to know what can you do to help your child become a multilingual speaker. The first one is use your primary or heritage language. This will help them to become proficient speakers in that language and as I've said this sets the foundation for them to learn subsequent languages whether that's one, two or more. So, they need different opportunities to practice these languages so don't just stick to talking, sing, read books, watch TV shows, take them to cultural events, expose them to different members of the family who are also going to be proficient speakers. It's really important that they are immersed in your primary language.

As your child gets older and they become more skilled at that first language you might consider a language school. Now, of course, language school is not for everybody but for a period of time I know many parents who find it invaluable to help their child learn a more academic style of language, different to that they use when they're conversing with each other. And then for some languages they might learn how to read and write in their primary language. The other thing is we want to encourage our children to use their skills when communicating with extended family

members, community members and other people they might encounter as they start to grow and move out into community.

Now there are some strategies that some people have found particularly useful and there are two that I'm going to talk about today. Some parents might use one person one language, and this is particularly useful if you've got parents who are skilled in different languages, or you've got two parents who are skilled in two languages, but they choose one language each. So, you might have a parent who speaks very well in English, and they use that predominantly in the family home whilst the other parent might speak Vietnamese really skilfully so they might use that when they're interacting with their child. And in these sorts of circumstances if you're going to use this strategy you can encourage grandparents, aunts, uncles, friends, they can choose to speak to the infant or the child in their preferred language. And in this way a child can be exposed to skilled speakers of the primary language and I'm going to really emphasise that skilled speakers.

Typically, children who are going to develop two languages they are likely to do this from birth and they can develop these languages simultaneously. Now, I'm sure I'm speaking to many people who have this amazing skill but what I want you to know is all the research tells us is that when this occurs that development of language is very similar to monolingual, so children who only learn to speak one language and in this case in Australia that's probably English. There is a similar pattern of development whether they learn one language or whether they learn two or three or more.

Another point I want you to really take away from today it is dependent upon exposure. Now by that I mean lets just say for example you've got parents who are both skilled English speakers, but grandma speaks Italian. If that child only sees grandma once a fortnight and that is the only time, they're going to be exposed to Italian their exposure to English is quite considerable, their exposure to Italian is reduced. And so, the level of skill acquired when you compare English to Italian is going to be different. English exposure is more, the development will occur more, Italian with grandma once a fortnight will be far less. Now it doesn't mean the child won't develop those skills, but it just means that one language will develop faster and perhaps with greater proficiency and the other will take a longer time to develop.

Now there's another strategy which some parents like to adopt, and this is the one activity, one language. And sometimes this occurs in families where parents do not want to have, I only speak Vietnamese and you only speak English they might pick an activity. And so, for this as an example I've given here it maybe during bath time we only speak Vietnamese but during all the other times we speak English or conversely, we speak English at bath time and for the rest of the time we speak our primary language. And again, you have to consider the level of exposure. If you want your child to develop two or more languages at the same time to the same level of skill you need to try and expose them to both languages at

the same level, I hope that makes sense.

It is important to remember exposure, so if you're thinking oh my child only heard Italian with grandma but gee, they're not very good at Italian it's going to be the exposure that is occurring and why that's causing that different. If you use this strategy of one activity one language you need to remember to change the activity periodically because each activity will have its own vocabulary and you need to consider how many times a day you might use that different activity to help your child be exposed or learn that second language.

There are also many questions about why would my child want to be a multilingual speaker when we're growing up in Australia and Australia is predominantly an English-speaking country. Well let me tell you there are a number of pieces of research that have highlighted the benefits of being a speaker of heritage, of parents culture. They can provide, this can provide a sense of cultural identity and the understanding they belong to a community within Australia that has so many gifts to give them.

It can enhance their understanding of their own heritage or of their parents heritage or of their grandparents heritage. It provides children with a chance to appreciate other cultural elements of that heritage, the literature, the music, the events, and this is a really important part of living in a diverse community. It also enhances connection with extended family. Now, I can tell you many, many stories of how some of my Indian colleagues and Indian clients who have really chosen to highlight English but when the child comes to speak to grandparents in India via, we've all learned how to do Skype and Zoom and Teams, they have no ability to communicate with extended family in India because they don't understand the language. And that becomes quite a barrier, and it causes in some families quite a bit of angst in terms of why haven't you taught your child the language of our heritage.

In that way being a multilingual speaker creates those bonds that are so, so very important. I think in this day and age where we have that really tiny family, the value of having aunts, uncles, grandparents that you can communicate with is so, so important. I can't stress that even more. So, some researchers and I think I touched upon this before is that multilingual children who have developed more than one language might well have a broader vocabulary. And I've heard a number of friends who are French speakers say to me "Oh English does not have a word for this emotion or this event" and are better at understanding language structures when they come to learning at school. And finally, and some day down the track for multilingual speakers there are certainly career and employment opportunities that are open to them that are not open to monolingual people.

But there are challenges aren't there? And I touched upon this before there is often pressure to speak only English and parents are given this advice from the family GP to the maternal and child health nurse to the friendly

and very supportive classroom teacher. It happens less now but it still happens. And that there is a lot of pressure to continue to speak English. However, I can categorically say to you tonight that advice is incorrect. Children need to be well versed in their primary language so that they can more easily acquire second and subsequent languages.

Now this is an important skill. Some of our parents, some of you may not be particularly skilled in English and if you remove your primary language, the language that you are most skilled at, and only speak English, a language that you are not as well skilled at, your children will be learning English from someone who is not a skilled speaker. And we know that can have an overall detrimental impact on language acquisition. The other thing is if you are trying to use English and you're not skilled at English what often will happen is you will speak less. You won't mean to but that's what happens. So, we want children to grow up in a very language rich environment and the best way you can do that if you are not skilled or you feel you're not skilled at English is to keep using your primary language.

So, for those parents who do not think their English is particularly good this use of their primary language helps your child be a skilled speaker. In these situations, your child will learn to speak English when they go to day care or kindergarten or preschool or have classes at the library or hear English from skilled speakers. This does not include television. Television is not a teacher. Some children will pick up language from television, but it cannot replace that interaction that comes from communicating with another person. So, please remember TV is not an adequate replacement.

Academic achievement, parents often worry that their children will not be skilful learners if they don't learn a language. Now the one piece of information I do want to tell you is that if your child has had no experience of learning English before they start school, so before they start prep or foundation there may be some initial delays, initial. But for those children who have started to learn English prior to going to school whether it's from day care or kinder and I can't impress upon you how important kindergarten is. Or if they were really starting to learn English in those first years of schools by the time, they get to grades five and six there is no difference between them and children who only speak English, it's important. So, if you're thinking I only want my child to speak Cantonese before they start school, I would want you to consider putting your child in those pre-school educational environments such as kinder or day care to give them that exposure from skilled speakers.

There are some challenges in raising a multilingual child. As children get older sometimes, they start to lose their primary language and this becomes a frustration for many. It can be there's a lack of input so you might start to reduce your use of your primary language once your child hits school or your children because they're at school are exposed to English more and more and more. English can sometimes be the language that their older siblings choose, or their friends choose. And sometimes

children might say to you as parents “I don’t want to speak this language; I only want to speak English” and for all the reasons I spoke about before I want you to encourage them to maintain their ability in their primary or heritage language.

So, to prevent this from happening or to try and decrease it at the very best you could talk to them about the benefits of keeping those additional languages. You could continue to actively put them in environments where they’re experiencing their primary language with other people. You have to keep it interesting so if you’re thinking I’m only going to send them to language school and that’s it then that may not be sufficient. So, go to cultural events, have time with extended family or friends where your primary language continues to be spoken and encourage your extended family to continue to talk to your child in that primary language.

I do want to mention language delays because some children have delays. Current stats indicate that anywhere between 10 to 20 percent of children will experience some type of delay. If they are multilingual and I’ve said this previously they are not at greater risk of having a language delay, they are not. However, some children might have a language delay in their primary language and if this does occur, they will then more likely have difficulties in learning second and subsequent languages. It doesn’t mean you should stop exposing them, but it might be more challenging. So, for these children they might exhibit a very fundamental difficulty in learning language and for those children that’s where people like speech pathologists or speech therapy come into play. But let me just say this is not the 90 percent of children who will learn a second language without difficulty. But for some children there might be so I just want to have that caveat that you be aware that some children no matter what you do might have some language delay and of course they’re the sort of children that I as a speech pathologist see.

Now I want to talk about the Silent Period. I don’t know if any of you have heard about the Silent Period but in speech pathology terms, we know that a lot of children go through what we call the Silent Period. And this typically occurs when they’re starting to learn a second or subsequent language for the first time. What happens is the children start to listen and process this new language that they’re not familiar with, but they don’t speak to anyone. Now there a number of reasons this occurs, and it might be the style of learner that they are, it might be that they need more time to process, it is not a problem as such and can occur for weeks and for some children several months.

However, during this time continue to encourage your child to interact with others, communicate by gesture, communicate by demonstration and then very slowly but gradually they will start to go through that, so that’s that pre-production stage, they will start to go through those early linguistic stages. Remember everyone develops at their own pace.

So, sometimes if they’re learning languages, you might see a plateau of

language acquisition and all this means is that they are starting to learn these other languages, these other vocabularies before they start to use them. But if they're exposed in equal amounts to the second and subsequent languages they will continue to develop.

Now code switching. Code switching is when a child bounces from language to language. Previously and including when I was a young graduate this occurred, we used to think that "Oh, the child is confused, that means they're not learning language appropriately" and often was seen by parents and teachers and speech pathologists as a problem. What we now know is that code switching when they bounce from one language to another is a sign of control and experimentation and learning. If you see this, please don't be concerned. I just want to touch on code switching for parents. When we talked about using one parent one language or one activity one language what I would suggest is try to limit your code switching when you're doing those activities. And the reason I say this is not necessarily because of vocabulary but because of the different grammatically rules and structure, sentence structure within different languages that's certainly might create some confusion which is why we have those very specific strategies of one parent or one activity per language. But for a child who's learning it this is not a problem at all.

Now I'm coming to the end of my talk and I'm going to ask if anyone has some questions. I am going to make my slides available as a handout and I'll send that to our lovely librarians tomorrow. At the end of this slide which I'm not going to go to now because I realise, I have been talking and talking and talking and we need some time for questions.

I have added some strategies that you might implement when you're having a conversation, when you're developing vocabulary and they're going to be at the end of that PowerPoint. If you get that handout and you're thinking Lisa didn't say this last night these are just some suggestions I've added because I probably was aware that I would run out of time. If we now come back to any questions.

Lorrie: I'd like to bring up the question, someone asked "How do you define a skilled speaker of English?"

Lisa Decker: A skilled speaker is someone who and it's a feeling, I don't think you can do an assessment, well we can do assessments, but a skilled speaker is someone who's been using that language for a length of time and feel that they can express their thoughts and ideas really easily without any difficulty in that language. If and I'll use English as an example, if you've tried to make the decision that you're only going to speak English and you're constantly thinking of "Oh, what is that word and I don't know how I'm going to put that, I'm not quite sure how to say this" that says to me that you are not a skilled speaker in that language. So, I would then revert back to using your primary language certainly in those beginning stages when your child is just beginning to learn how to speak.

Lorrie: Another question that's here is, "I have many friends children that can understand their heritage language, but they refuse to communicate or speak back to their parents in that language." It looked to me like some of your additional slides are going to suggest some strategies, but it would be nice if you talk about that a little bit.

Lisa Decker: Absolutely and this is a really common issue. In fact, I have in the clinic at the moment several children who've blatantly said to their parents I am not speaking in that language I only want to speak English. Now, the really challenging thing with language is you can't make someone speak, it's one of the skills that we have when you can't force someone to do it. All I can say to you is to continue to remind your child that if they're going to speak to grandparents or friends this is a really important skill and that you're not going to make them speak their primary language all the time but if they can keep some skills up it means that they can speak to extended family.

So, this is where keeping it interesting, keeping it reinforced, not by rewards so much but giving children opportunities to practice using that skill rather than trying to make them do it is really, really important. In this case for the children in the clinic I've actually enlisted support from family and as I said before because we can use Zoom and Skype and Teams, we've got that ability to communicate with family when we can't go and visit them. It is about providing enough reason for your child to want to keep doing it and I know it's hard, I know it's hard, but the unfortunate thing is unless they keep practicing, they will start to lose some of that skill.

Lorrie: The next question is "I speak to my child in Italian when talking directly to the child but my partner has no Italian and only speaks English. So, when the three of us are together we all speak English." The question is really about "Is it confusing for the child seeing me changing back and forth?"

Lisa Decker: No, not at all in fact they're the opportunities when you can actually foster that communication amongst family and in this circumstance if you've got someone who's a skilled speaker in English and even if you think "Oh my English is not as good" you can't be using that code switching within a conversation so everyone can participate, I wouldn't worry about that, it's not confusing to children at all if you switch. And in fact, it gives them this great example of I can speak Italian but I can also speak English and that is what we want to foster. The child understands that they can switch from one code to the next to the next and have all those opportunities to speak to people in different languages.

Lorrie: The next questions is "My partner and I speak different languages and then also speak English what's your feeling about children learning three languages all at once?"

Lisa Decker: Absolutely awesome, what a gift to be able to do that. And you might consider if that's the case where you might do one person one language and then you might incorporate an activity where you all speak English or

you all speak English if you're skilled English speakers and then you might do an activity in mum's primary or heritage language and then a different activity in dad's primary or heritage language. And not forgetting those activities could be reading a story book, it could be going for a walk in the park and if you get this handout there are a number of different ways and you can use those opportunities to foster that language. But that is the perfect situation so that your child becomes multilingual rather than bilingual.

Lorrie: The next one is "You mentioned that some kids may have a delay in language what would you define as a normal, not all kids start talking at the same time so what's normal delay or acceptable delay?"

Lisa Decker: We seem to define it in six month lots and that's really arbitrary so it's just how it goes. But what we consider to be a late talker is if by the time a child is two irrespective of language, it doesn't matter whether it's English, Italian or Vietnamese by the time they're two if they have no words, they might understand everything that's said but if they're not speaking or have no single words, we start to consider them as late talkers. So, at that point getting some advice on how you might use different strategies and techniques to help them start talking is really, really important. What I want to reassure people though is if you have a late talker that does not mean they're going to be delayed for the rest of their life in language.

I have two children, one is 31 and one is 32, my 31-year-old son was a late talker, he didn't start speaking until he was two and he is a teacher. So, what I want to say to you is often at two it's about getting advice on how you might facilitate or get the child talking rather than doing therapy with the child.

Lorrie: The next question, it kind of builds on that other one, I don't know if you've already answered it with that last answer but she's saying, "I'm aware that everyone is different however how long is the silent period that still is considered OK, when they're at kinder or they start kinder with no English or how long do we usually expect the child to start to pick up English at kindergarten?"

Lisa Decker: It's a really good question. There's been some individual research articles that says it can last up to twelve months and that would be the extended period of time but what I would say to you is if they're going to kindergarten, you would expect probably towards the end of Term 2 you might start to see some single words and not forgetting that once that starts in a typically developing child it's like a snowball. Once they start to realise "Oh these words are really working" you might see a sudden explosion of words. And for some children it might take them a while to develop that first 30 to 50 words and then bang they're starting to speak in sentences. It can take a while.

If you are concerned though there are a couple of things you can do. If you

think “Oh my child is not really talking” I would always get their hearing tested, that’s the first thing that all speech pathologists would do just to make sure that’s not an issue. The other thing I would consider is, is my child developing typically in their primary language. That’s a really important question. If you have a child, say for example who is speaking Italian and they’re a very skilled Italian speaker, but they’ve started kinder and at kinder they’re not saying very much because they’ve never heard any English I would give them at least a couple of terms, around six months to get them going to see what happens at that point. But of course, if you’re starting to really worry and think “Oh, I don’t know what’s going on” then please, please seek advice. So, a speech pathologist you could certainly talk to your family GP and have a chat about that but getting some advice would probably be the best course of action after you get the hearing test if you’re worried.

Lorrie: The next question is “With the one person one language approach and I’m using my heritage language and the child is telling me something in English is it a good strategy to rephrase in my parent language?”

Lisa Decker: Absolutely, rephrasing or what we call recasting in your primary language. Just to clarify, you’ve said something the child has responded in English I would do the play dumb, creative stupidity and go back to your primary language just to confirm that you’ve understood what they’ve said. So, to encourage the use of both languages absolutely recasting, remodelling is a parents favourite tool.

Lorrie: I speak to my grandson in Italian, but his parents speak to him in English, so I speak to him in Italian most days, my daughter doesn’t speak Italian and I often translate after I speak to him. Should I do that or does that confuse him if I’m translating for my daughter’s benefit?

Lisa Decker: I was about to say if you’re translating when it’s just you and your grandson you don’t need to. If it’s for your daughter-in-law or daughter’s benefit by all means, that won’t be confusing to your child because chances are they’re hearing it in English and in Italian so it’s that recasting. And you can say I’m just explaining to mummy this, so by all means do it, it won’t hurt.

Lorrie: When my son is speaking in English sometimes, he is using the other language, the words in the sentence, should I tell him that that’s not an English word or how do I deal with that?

Lisa Decker: No, so that code switching that I spoke about where they bounce from one code to another that’s completely normal and if you wanted to you could give the child back again to confirm that you’ve understand back in entirely one language. Whether it’s Italian or Vietnamese or English you might go “Oh did you mean blah, blah, blah” and off you go and then just recast. But if they’re code switching within a sentence as I said years ago that was considered to be a problem it is not a problem.

Lorrie: I've been speaking to my three-year-old in English and he's quite fluent in it now and now I want to introduce another language can I stop talking in English completely and just start talking to him in my heritage language?

Lisa Decker: It's a really good question. So, he continues his acquisition of English because at three it's still developing, I don't know that I would and there's no research, this is just my personal opinion. I don't know that I'd drop English altogether I would probably start to speak in the next language with an activity and just start to slowly increase the length of time you're exposing your child to that second language, but I'd still maintain that English exposure because language develops at an incremental rate. So, the more you hear it the more skilled you become and at three your child is still acquiring English skills I would just add, that would be my suggestion.

Lorrie: Here's one that I missed. I'm sorry [Neesha? 00:57:50]. My husband and I have been speaking to my daughter now, who's two, from birth in Malayan, which is an Indian language, and she also gets exposed to our native language through Skype with the family phone calls to India. She goes to day care three days a week and sometimes my husband and I speak in English from time to time but she's not yet started saying as many words as I thought she would've at two years old. Should she be worried?

Lisa Decker: Look I don't think so because think about this in terms of vocabulary acquisition it used to be that we only spoke and counted the words in English but in fact when you're counting vocabulary what you're counting is the accumulation of all the languages that she's speaking. So, whilst you might have this many words in English, you're going to potentially have a different number of words in Malayan and then potentially a different number of words in a third language. You don't count them as all as just one language you count them all. So, what I would do is if she's been exposed to those three languages continue to do that and it just takes a little bit of time to acquire all those vocabularies, I would not be concerned at this point, no.

Lorrie: Great, hope that everybody feels that their question was either touched on by another question or answered within the talk. Because we're going to finish up now and I'd like to thank Lisa very much for the talk tonight, it was really interesting to me and I'm sure to everyone at home.

Lisa Decker: I certainly hope everyone has enjoyed our talk tonight and I'm hoping that it's answered some questions that you might have had in your head about having a multilingual child.

Lorrie: Thank you so much. Good night everyone.

[End of recorded material at 00:59:57]