

SUPPORTING THE SPEECH DEVELOPMENT OF A MULTILINGUAL CHILD





The speech development of a multilingual child can proceed in the same way as the speech development of a monolingual child. However, more focus is often needed on the development of a multilingual child's speech, so that the child would learn all the languages that you want them to learn.

Parents should speak to their child using their own strongest language that comes to them naturally: the language in which they think. This will also allow the child to learn rich language. It is important that the child has a functional language with their family, so that conversations with their immediate family and other relatives is also possible when they are adults. If you have more than one language in use in your family, you should think even before the child is born about which of the languages you want the child to learn. The recommendation is that one adult will consistently speak the language of their choice to the child. If the parents have different mother tongues, each parent can speak their own language to the child.

The child must sufficiently often hear and use the languages that you want them to learn. If there are few speakers of the home language in the child's everyday life, the parents must invest more

than usual in the development of the child's home language. It is important to use the language that the child is practicing in diverse ways: for greeting, asking about something, commenting, telling stories, making jokes, requesting things, and expressing emotions. A good knowledge of the home language will also support the learning of Finnish. Sometimes a child hears a lot of their home language, but only a little Finnish. In such a case, it is important to offer the child more opportunities to practice Finnish (for example, clubs, hobbies and play-dates).

For the speech development with children of all ages, it is useful to talk to the child and do things together with them. Talk to the child, even if they only understand a little of the home language or would not be able to respond to you. A child learns words when they are repeated often in their everyday life. Include the child in everyday activities, talk about what's going on around you, have discussions with the child, reminisce about things experienced together, listen to the child, play games, and interact with them. Since the child learns the language best in real conversational situations, it would be good for the child to watch TV or use a mobile phone/tablet only for a short time each day. The TV programs and videos should be in the home language or in Finnish.



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Babies and toddlers (0–2 years of age)

A newborn baby does not yet understand speech, but it is good for an adult to talk to the baby and respond to the baby's sounds and movements so that the baby gets excited about speech and communication. It is important for the baby to explore the world together with an adult. The parent should tell the baby what everyday things you are doing (such as “let’s change your diaper now”) and name objects that the baby seems to be interested in. Babies enjoy songs and rhymes and when the parents change their tone when speaking. Babies learn to understand words before being able to produce them and express themselves by crying and by making noises, facial expressions, and gestures. The first words usually appear around the age of one.



- Play peekaboo together. Cover your own face or your child’s face, e.g. with your hands or a scarf, wait for a minute, take your hands/scarf away from your face and joyfully say “peekaboo”.
- Throw or roll a ball to each other. Build towers from building blocks.
- When a child starts using words, expand the child’s means of expression (for example, if the child points to a car and says “car”, the adult can say “yes, there goes the car”).
- Look at simple picture books with the baby. At first, point and name pictures for the child. When the child starts pointing at the pictures themselves, it is important to name the pictures that the child is pointing to. Once the child has produced their first words, you can encourage the child to imitate, for example, the sounds of animals and easy words.
- Play knob puzzles together. Name the pieces of the puzzle and comment on the course of the play (for example, “good, you found the place for the duck!”).

Small children (approx. 2–5 years of age)

At this age, the child’s speech develops rapidly and becomes more diverse. At approximately the age of two, a child usually begins to combine words and produce short sentences. The child becomes more inter-ested in their surroundings and gradually starts understanding more than just talk relating to the situation. As a child grows, you can talk with them about more broader topics. Children enjoy having an adult show interest in what they are doing. The child can be included in small everyday activities, and you can discuss everyday events, play games that follow a plot, and play board games with the child.

- Play together, for example, with dolls, cars, animal figures, toy china, role-playing clothes, or lego blocks. Talk about what’s going on in the game, ask the child to tell you about the game, and suggest new events for the game.
- Read picture books that contain a short story. Discuss the story with the child and ask questions about the story or the pictures.
- Draw and color together. Explain what you are drawing, and you can also come up with a story about the picture.
- Explore nature and the environment together. Find things like rocks, colorful leaves or insects and talk about them.
- Play memory games and board games suitable for your child’s age. You can borrow them from the library.





Preschoolers and school children (6-years of age and older)

The child already speaks using long sentences and ponders a wide range of phenomena, such as the causes and effects of things. The child learns conceptual words such as “in between”, “as much”, and “earlier”. As the beginning of school approaches, you can gradually start introducing letters and numbers to the child. Many children still enjoy playing and learn language and social skills while playing.

- Read books with a longer story. Ask the child about the story using “why” questions. Sit down with your child and discuss the emotions of the characters in the story and the causes and effects of the events. Discuss whether the child has experiences of their own regarding the subject you have been reading about.
- Play word games. Take turns in coming up with, for example, names of animals or fruits, or words starting with the letter “A”. Play word explanation games where one player describes something and others try to guess what they mean (e.g. Junior Alias).
- Play games where you need to follow certain rules (e.g. tag or hide-and-seek).
- When talking to a child, use descriptive words in your speech (such as “cheerfully”, “complex”) and precise concepts of time and place (such as “**the day after tomorrow**, we are going swimming” or “put the spoons in the **top** drawer”).
- It is advisable to use the child’s home language to discuss the things taught at school. In this way, the child’s vocabulary also increases in the home language.

What if...

1. it is difficult to find time in daily life to practice your home language? Training can be included in all the everyday moments. For example, in connection with cooking and eating together with your child, you can discuss what is being cooked today, where the ingredients were purchased, how the food is prepared, how it tastes, how to set the table, and how to clean the kitchen. If the child spends most of the day in a Finnish-speaking day care center, you can try to arrange a hobby or a playdate with friends in the child’s native language.
2. the child does not speak the home language? Sometimes a child will prefer to speak the language they learned in day care. The child should not be forced or pressured into using the home language. However, a parent should be consistent in speaking their own language and use the home language to repeat what the child has told them. The child can be encouraged to use the home language, for example, by watching children’s programs in the home language, by keeping in touch with relatives, or by introducing the child to the family’s culture.
3. the child’s speech develops slowly or new words do not seem to remain in their mind? Some children experience difficulties in the development of speech and language, even in cases where their language development has been supported. In such cases, it is a good idea to make an evaluation appointment with a speech therapist.

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