

# Parent Guide to Bilingual Education

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## A Comprehensive Resource for Families Committed to Biliteracy and Bilingualism

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## Introduction: The Gift of Bilingualism

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### Why Bilingual Education Matters

One of the most important gifts parents can give their children is the opportunity to become bilingual and biliterate. Bilingualism is not a barrier to learning—it is a **superpower** that opens doors to academic success, cultural connection, and global opportunity.

## Key Facts About Bilingualism:

- More than half of the world’s population is bilingual to some degree
- Bilingual children demonstrate superior academic performance in reading and mathematics, even when tested only in English
- Bilingual students develop more positive attitudes toward multilingualism and multiculturalism
- Biliteracy (the ability to read and write in two languages) is a valuable skill in our increasingly diverse world

## What This Guide Covers

This guide is designed to help you:

- Understand how bilingual children develop language skills
  - Support your child’s bilingual journey at home
  - Maintain your home language while supporting English development
  - Build academic vocabulary in both languages
  - Make a long-term commitment to biliteracy and bilingualism
  - Address common concerns and misconceptions
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## Understanding Bilingual Development

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### How Bilingual Children Learn

Bilingual children do not have two separate language systems in their minds. Instead, they develop a **shared semantic system**—a unified way of thinking about concepts that connects both languages together.

### What This Means for Your Child:

- Learning a word in Spanish (like “fracción”) helps your child understand the concept of fractions, which strengthens their understanding when they learn the English word “fraction”

- Bilingual children are not confused by two languages; they are building a richer, more complex understanding of how language works
- The languages support and strengthen each other

## **Typical Bilingual Development Milestones**

### **Birth to 12 Months:**

- Babies exposed to two languages learn to distinguish between the sounds of both languages
- They begin to recognize patterns in each language
- Early exposure sets the foundation for bilingual development

### **12-24 Months:**

- First words appear in one or both languages
- Vocabulary grows in both languages (combined vocabulary is typically similar to monolingual children)
- Code-switching begins (mixing languages naturally)

### **2-3 Years:**

- Vocabulary growth accelerates in both languages
- Children begin to understand that different people speak different languages
- Grammar structures develop in both languages

### **3-5 Years:**

- Bilingual children become more aware of language differences
- They can often switch between languages based on who they're talking to
- Literacy skills begin to develop in both languages

### **School Age (5+ Years):**

- Academic vocabulary develops in both languages
- Reading and writing skills transfer between languages
- Bilingual children often outperform monolingual peers in metalinguistic awareness (understanding how language works)

## Code-Switching: A Sign of Bilingual Strength

**What is code-switching?** Code-switching is when bilingual people mix words, phrases, or sentences from both languages in the same conversation. For example: “Vamos to the park” or “I like los tacos.”

**Is code-switching a problem?** No! Code-switching is a **normal and healthy sign of bilingual development**. It shows that your child:

- Understands both languages well enough to use them flexibly
- Is developing sophisticated communication skills
- Can choose the best word or phrase from either language to express themselves

Code-switching is not confusion—it’s linguistic flexibility.

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## The Long-Term Commitment to Biliteracy

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### Why Long-Term Commitment Matters

Biliteracy—the ability to read and write in two languages—is not developed overnight. It requires a **sustained, long-term commitment** from families and schools working together.

### The Research Shows:

- Bilingual students who maintain strong home language skills throughout elementary and middle school show superior academic outcomes
- Students who stop using their home language often experience a decline in overall academic performance
- Biliteracy takes 7-10 years to fully develop in both languages

### The Biliteracy Timeline

#### Years 1-2 (K-1st Grade):

- Focus on oral language development in both languages

- Begin pre-literacy skills (phonemic awareness, letter recognition)
- Build foundational reading skills in one language first

### **Years 2-4 (1st-3rd Grade):**

- Develop reading fluency in the first language
- Begin reading instruction in the second language
- Build academic vocabulary in both languages

### **Years 4-7 (3rd-6th Grade):**

- Develop reading comprehension and writing skills in both languages
- Build academic vocabulary across content areas (science, social studies, math)
- Strengthen biliteracy through content-area reading and writing

### **Years 7-10 (6th-9th Grade):**

- Develop advanced literacy skills in both languages
- Use both languages for academic learning
- Prepare for high school with bilingual academic skills

## **Making the Commitment**

### **What Long-Term Commitment Looks Like:**

- Prioritizing home language use throughout elementary, middle, and high school
- Reading books in both languages regularly
- Maintaining cultural connections and traditions
- Supporting your child's bilingual education even when it feels challenging
- Celebrating bilingual and bicultural identity

### **Challenges You Might Face:**

- Your child may prefer English as they get older
- Peer pressure to speak only English
- Limited access to books and resources in your home language
- Concerns about academic performance

## How to Stay Committed:

- Remember that biliteracy is a long-term investment in your child's future
  - Connect with other bilingual families for support and encouragement
  - Use your home language consistently, even when your child responds in English
  - Find community resources (libraries, cultural centers, language classes) that support bilingualism
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## Supporting Bilingualism at Home

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### Create a Language-Rich Home Environment

#### Fill Your Home with Bilingual Resources:

- Books in both languages (picture books, chapter books, novels)
- Bilingual games and puzzles
- Music in both languages
- Movies and videos in both languages
- Bilingual apps and educational technology
- Magazines and newspapers in your home language

**Why This Matters:** Children learn language through exposure and use. The more they see and hear both languages in their home, the more naturally they will develop bilingual skills.

### Strategies for Supporting Both Languages

#### Strategy 1: One Person, One Language

##### *How It Works:*

- One parent (or caregiver) consistently speaks one language
- The other parent (or caregiver) consistently speaks the other language
- Children learn to associate each person with a specific language

*Example:*

- Mom speaks Spanish; Dad speaks English
- Children learn to speak Spanish with Mom and English with Dad
- Over time, children become comfortable switching between languages based on who they're talking to

*Advantages:*

- Clear, consistent language exposure
- Children develop strong skills in both languages
- Easy to implement with two parents who speak different languages

*Challenges:*

- Requires consistency from both parents
- May be difficult if both parents speak both languages
- Children might resist speaking the minority language

**Strategy 2: Time and Place**

*How It Works:*

- Designate specific times or places for each language
- For example: Spanish at home, English at school
- Or: Spanish on weekends, English on weekdays

*Example:*

- Monday-Friday: Primarily English (school language)
- Weekends: Primarily Spanish (family time, cultural activities)
- Dinner time: Only Spanish is spoken
- Homework time: English is used

*Advantages:*

- Flexible and adaptable to your family's schedule
- Works well when both parents speak both languages

- Helps children understand that different contexts call for different languages

#### *Challenges:*

- Requires consistent enforcement
- Children might mix languages across contexts
- Less clear boundaries than OPOL

### **Strategy 3: Minority Language at Home**

#### *How It Works:*

- The home language (minority language) is used at home
- The community language (majority language) is used outside the home
- The school provides instruction in both languages

#### *Example:*

- Spanish is spoken at home
- English is spoken at school and in the community
- The school provides bilingual instruction in both languages

#### *Advantages:*

- Protects the home language from being lost
- Aligns with many dual language immersion programs
- Clear separation between home and school languages

#### *Challenges:*

- Children may resist speaking the minority language if it's not spoken in the community
- Requires strong family commitment to maintain home language

## **Daily Activities to Support Bilingual Development**

### **Reading Together:**

- Read books in both languages every day

- Ask questions about the story in the language you're reading
- Let your child choose books in both languages
- Read the same story in both languages and compare

### **Talking and Listening:**

- Have conversations in both languages
- Ask open-ended questions that encourage your child to use more language
- Play word games and rhyming games in both languages
- Tell stories about your family and cultural traditions

### **Singing and Music:**

- Sing songs in both languages
- Listen to music in both languages
- Teach your child songs from your cultural traditions
- Use music to teach vocabulary and concepts

### **Playing Games:**

- Play board games and card games in both languages
- Use games to teach vocabulary and concepts
- Make up games that involve language (I Spy, 20 Questions, Rhyming Games)
- Play with toys while narrating in both languages

### **Cooking and Meals:**

- Cook traditional foods from your culture
- Talk about ingredients and cooking steps in your home language
- Teach your child the names of foods in both languages
- Share meals as a family and speak your home language

### **Connecting with Culture:**

- Celebrate cultural holidays and traditions
- Visit cultural centers, museums, and community events

- Connect with other families who speak your home language
  - Share stories about your family's cultural heritage
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## **Building Bilingual Family Culture**

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### **1. Make Bilingualism a Family Value**

#### **Actions:**

- Talk about why bilingualism is important to your family
- Celebrate your child's bilingual achievements
- Share stories about why your home language is important to you
- Explain the benefits of bilingualism
- Model positive attitudes toward bilingualism

### **2. Maintain Cultural Traditions**

#### **Ideas:**

- Celebrate cultural holidays and festivals
- Cook traditional foods and teach your child family recipes
- Teach your child traditional games and activities
- Share family stories and history
- Invite extended family to participate in cultural activities
- Visit cultural centers and museums

### **3. Connect with Extended Family**

#### **How:**

- Arrange regular video calls with family members who speak your language
- Send letters, emails, or voice messages to family members
- Share photos and stories with extended family

- Invite family members to visit
- Have your child teach English-speaking family members words in your home language

## **4. Build Community Connections**

### **Ways to Connect:**

- Join cultural organizations and community centers
- Attend cultural events and festivals
- Enroll your child in heritage language classes
- Join parent groups for bilingual families
- Participate in cultural celebrations at school

## **5. Use Your Home Language in Public**

### **Why This Matters:**

- Shows your child that your home language is valued
- Normalizes bilingualism in the community
- Gives your child confidence in their bilingual identity
- Models pride in cultural heritage

### **How:**

- Speak your home language with your child in public (grocery store, park, etc.)
  - Teach your child to greet people in your home language
  - Use your home language with other family members in public
  - Don't hide or be ashamed of your home language
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# Resources and Next Steps

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## Key Takeaways

1. **Bilingualism is a superpower.** Bilingual children have academic, cognitive, and social advantages.
2. **Long-term commitment matters.** Biliteracy takes 7-10 years to develop. Consistent support from families and schools is essential.
3. **Home language is an asset.** Strong home language skills support English development and academic success.
4. **Code-switching is normal.** Mixing languages is a sign of bilingual strength, not confusion.
5. **Consistency is key.** Consistent use of both languages at home is the strongest predictor of bilingual development.
6. **Community matters.** Connecting with other bilingual families and cultural communities supports long-term bilingual maintenance.
7. **Celebrate bilingual identity.** Making bilingualism and biculturalism a family value strengthens your child's commitment to bilingual development.

## Resources for Families

### Books for Parents:

- “Raising Bilingual Children” by Barbara Zurer Pearson
- “Growing Up Bilingual” by Fred Genesee
- “The Bilingual Family: A Practical Guide to Raising Bilingual Children” by Edith Harding and Philip Riley

### Books for Children (Bilingual):

- Look for bilingual picture books at your local library
- Search for books in your home language and English
- Ask librarians for recommendations

### Technology and Apps:

- Duolingo: Language learning app
- Babbel: Language learning app
- YouTube: Search for videos in your home language
- Netflix: Many shows available in multiple languages

## **Next Steps**

### **1. Assess Your Current Situation:**

- Which languages are used at home?
- How much exposure does your child have to each language?
- What are your family's goals for bilingualism?

### **2. Choose a Strategy:**

- One Person, One Language
- Time and Place
- Minority Language at Home
- Or create your own approach

### **3. Create a Plan:**

- Decide how you'll use both languages at home
- Set specific goals (e.g., read 3 books in home language per week)
- Identify resources and support systems
- Plan how to maintain home language as your child gets older

### **4. Build Community:**

- Connect with other bilingual families
- Find a dual language program and/or heritage language classes
- Participate in cultural events and celebrations
- Join online communities for bilingual families

### **5. Stay Committed:**

- Remember that biliteracy is a long-term investment

- Celebrate small victories
  - Be patient with challenges
  - Keep bilingualism a family priority
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## Remember

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Bilingualism is a gift. By supporting your child's bilingual development, you are:

- Opening doors to academic and professional opportunities
- Preserving your family's cultural heritage
- Building your child's cognitive and social skills
- Creating a bridge between languages and cultures
- Giving your child a superpower for the 21st century

**Your commitment to bilingualism matters. Keep going!** 🌍

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## About This Guide

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This guide was created by merging research and best practices from leading dual language education organizations and research institutions, including:

- Dual Language Schools ([duallanguageschools.org](http://duallanguageschools.org))
- Colorín Colorado ([colorincolorado.org](http://colorincolorado.org))
- Benchmark Universe
- Imagine Learning
- Center for Applied Linguistics

The guide emphasizes evidence-based practices, long-term commitment to biliteracy, and family engagement in bilingual education.

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