

Linguistic diversity in the survey among parents

Summary



In the context of the project Traveler between wor(l)ds parents from Germany, Lithuania, Romania, Slovakia and Slovenia were asked about their experiences. The aim was to gather insight into the lives of multilingual families in order to help other multilingual parents, to show what has proven successful and where the challenges of a multilingual upbringing lie.

In the following you shall find an overview of the language combinations of those people whose surveys have been analysed. Apart from that interesting and important point from the 18 surveys have been chosen and a professional comment was added.

For the comments on the statements of the parents the following sources (among others) have been used: *lingvo.info – Alles rund um Sprachen* (<http://lingvo.info>); *Wie Kinder Sprachen lernen. Und wie wir sie dabei unterstützen können* von Rosemarie Tracy (2008); *Ein Kind und zwei Sprachen* von Schneider und Frye (2011); *Kinder und ihre Sprachen - lebendige Mehrsprachigkeit: Sprachenporträts* von Hans-Jürgen Krumm (2001); *Studien des Vereins Frühe Mehrsprachigkeit an Kitas und Schulen* (<https://www.fmks-online.de/>), *Studien des Instituts für Medienverantwortung* (<https://www.medienverantwortung.de/projektbeispiele/#mehrsprachigkeit>).

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1. Languages at home - Languages in school (+ foreign languages)

In the survey it became clear that a lot of languages in an interesting diversity are being used: there were 19 different languages in 18 different combinations. The languages named in the survey belong to different language families: Germanic, Slavic, Italic, Finnic as well as Esperanto. Even this very small survey sample is excellent proof of how diverse, interesting, doable and infinite lived multilingualism can be.

Here you can find the different language combinations:

- Russian – Polish
- Arabic – German
- Russian/German – German
- Russian – German
- German/Russian/Turkish – German
- Russian/German – Russian/German
- German/Hungarian – German/Romanian (Foreign languages: English and Spanish)
- German/Slovakian – Slovakian
- Slovakian – German
- Slovakian/Czech – Swedish
- Slovakian/French – Luxembourgish/German/French
- Czech/Esperanto – ?
- Slovenian/German – Slovenian (Foreign languages: English and German)
- German/Slovenian – Slovenian/German
- Hungarian/Slovenian/German – Slovenian/Hungarian (Foreign languages: English and German)
- Bulgarian/Slovenian – Slovenian (Foreign languages: English and German)
- Lithuanian and Russian – Lithuanian (Foreign languages: German and English)
- Lithuanian, Spanish, Russian, English – German, Lithuanian

2. Extracts from surveys of parents bringing up their children multilingually

Speaking inhibitions

„The child is timid and wasn't able to speak for a long time.“

„[...] from experience we can advise parents to not be shocked when your child is a little late in beginning to talk.“



Professionals have long been aware that children who grow up with two or more languages tend to start to speak a little later than their monolingual peers. The reason for this is that the memorization process of our brain, that generally needs additional time to process and store several languages (comp. *Ein Kind und zwei Sprachen* (2011) von Schneider und Frye). The processing goes on in the child's brain and can obviously not be observed from without and differs from person to person.

The principle one person - one language

„Assign languages clearly and stick to them - the mother, for instance, only ever speaks one language and the father the other.“

„It's important to be firm as a parent and to speak one language with your child from the very start.“

„There is one rule that you have to stay true to come what may: one person speaks one and the same language all the time. Our children know that each parent speaks a different language and that the teacher at school speaks a different language too.“

Theoretically and empirically it has long since been shown that a consequent use of the principle "one language - one person" fosters the language acquisition of the child. (comp. Studien vom Verein Frühe Mehrsprachigkeit an Kitas und Schulen) In practice this means, that the child associates each of his or her languages with one caregiver who speaks this language with him or her. If the caregivers do not stick to their language they may cause unnecessary yet remediable confusion in the process of language learning for the child.

Bilingualism and multilingualism of human potential

„She has learned two languages as her natives languages - Russian and German consequently and parallelly.“

„Children accept two language [...] quite naturally.“

„Our children make use of more than two languages in their everyday life and there is no problem. They find it natural.“

„It is very important for the future to be able to speak many languages.“

„It is an advantage that the children speak with others in different languages and that they are able to communicate fluently. We travel a lot and our children have become a lot more self-confident.“

There still is the so called myths of monolingualism out there, that is that children get confused by and stunted in their development by learning more than one language simultaneously (comp. studies of the Institut für Medienverantwortung). However, ca. 70% of the population grow up multilingually. That children's brains are flexible and open for a simultaneous language acquisition is of great help in this process.

It has been proven that firms that have invested in the multilingualism of their employees have benefited from in the short and long term.

What is more, now that English has taken over as a lingua franca in our globalized world, language is still a means of identification of every human being and so it is of great importance to foster language learning of first and second languages apart from learning of English.

Parents support Multilingualism

„In my family, I found it important to keep Russian traditions this is a great motivation.“

„It would be great to find playmates for the kids in both languages.“

„[...]it makes sense to present speaking another language as something desirable.“

„Multilingualism is a great thing. Stimulate it. [directed to parents].“

Professionals as well as parents who practise multilingualism underline the importance of language input that goes beyond what school can offer. They have found it beneficial for motivation and saw better result in language learning. For example, parents recommend to uphold culture and traditions, to find playmates, to practise multilingualism themselves, to create a stimulating multilingual environment (comp. Wie Kinder Sprachen lernen: Und wie wir sie dabei unterstützen können (2008) von Rosemarie Tracy).

„[...]you have to persist and not stop trying, even if it doesn't seem to work - bilingual education needs a lot of patience but it is rewarded in the end.“

„To give [each] language good chances of development is not easy and takes a lot of effort and persistence. Parents have to keep it up, show a lot of patience and never give up.“

Even though there are good theoretical reasons for multilingualism, in some of the parents' statements you can see a certain coercion. The parents underline that it is paramount to stay firm and to insist on multilingualism. It takes hard work and patience because not in all cases the acquisition of more than one language is spontaneous, natural and without problems (comp. Wie Kinder Sprachen lernen: Und wie wir sie dabei unterstützen können (2008) von Rosemarie Tracy).

Respect cultural and linguistic diversity

„To bring up children to value and respect multilingualism, the diversity of languages and cultures, is a very good basis for a education because it fosters tolerance and respect towards other cultures.“

„[The children] are very open [towards different languages].“

Theory insists, that multilingualism always includes both linguistic and cultural aspects. You can never look at a language without taking culture into account because they form a whole. Speaking multiple languages always means enculturation into several cultures as well as a high level of tolerance towards that which is "foreign" and "other". For children, who are not as influenced as grown-ups by the politics of language and prestige a language enjoys, it is especially important to promote tolerance and openness for different languages and cultures (comp. Kinder und ihre Sprachen - lebendige Mehrsprachigkeit: Sprachenporträts (2001) von Hans-Jürgen Krumm).

3. Successful measures to help multilingualism

The parents in the survey have named measures that they took to promote multilingualism themselves and that they see as meaningful and practicable. The measures proposed in the quotations will be systematized in the second point.

3.1 Quotations from the parents' surveys

„[...] I have always made a great effort and tried to find something fun, interesting for them in Russian,[...] to go to Russia more often, to camps too, so that they would be in contact with their Russian peers.“

„[...] has not friends here who he could speak Russian/Turkish with.“

„[...] put together material that helped to foster language learning. These materials should be very varied and attractive for kids so that they are motivated to deepen their knowledge of the language in question.“

„Short term stays in the country whose language the kids speak less frequently have worked quite well.“

„Read to the children a lot and talk to them so that they learn Slovakian well. Also you should not correct mistakes just answer correctly.“

„Exchanging visits with families of the same language combination have encouraged us and given us pleasure.“

„... watch German language TV stations, go on holiday in German-speaking countries, spend as much time there as possible and let the child be self-reliant there.“

„In the weaker language: read a lot and early, let them read themselves, let them listen to CDs or watch TV if possible, have a lot of contact to people who speak the same language (if possible for a long period and exclusively).“

„Teach writing (my children haven't learned that). Let them enrol in language schools in the country (summer camp or sports camps etc.) Friendships with other children and parents who speak the same language in my town.“

„Speak different languages from early on - those that you speak well yourself - read books to them, sing children's songs, introduce them to an environment where the language is spoken too. Cartoons can be a great help, too.“

„I would not change anything. I will learn German myself in order to be able to help my child.“

„It is really important to make children learn from very early on.“

3.2 Overview over possibilities to foster multilingualism

