

the bilingual family newsletter

news and views for intercultural people

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2007
Volume 24
Number 1

editorial

Bringing up children bilingually can be a tough job. Parents can often feel isolated, and are sometimes confused by well meaning but inaccurate advice from professionals and other parents alike.

The support, encouragement and friendship of parents in similar situations can be a huge help. For many, there are established community groups of families that share the same language and culture – these groups can provide extra language training, and vital companionship. But what about the wider bi/multilingual community? How can families with different language backgrounds share their experiences?

The Waltham Forest Bilingual Group was set up by a diverse mix of families with a shared interest: bilingualism. In this issue Claire Thomas tells us how the group started, its aims, and how it goes about fostering and encouraging bilingualism amongst its members. She ends with a vision of a wider network of bilingual support groups that could promote bilingualism and language rights in the media.

Meanwhile Joke Dewilde's article shows how the multilingual environment of an international school may also help encourage positive attitudes towards bilingualism for some. Finally, Susan Rubinyi reminds us that, whatever support there is out there, it is still the parent that is 'the child's best advocate', but that we can all help those who are starting out. Passing on experiences and support to other parents can be of vital importance.

Sami Grover

Waltham Forest Bilingual Group: Supporting All Multilingual Families

Claire Thomas



The *Bilingual Family Newsletter* does a great job in helping us to learn about the options for multilingual parenting, to reflect on how we are doing, and it inspires us to continue. But have you ever wished you could sit down face-to-face with a group of other parents in bilingual families and talk things through? In 2003, a group of parents in multilingual families all living in Waltham Forest (a borough in North East London) did just that, and the *Waltham Forest Bilingual Group* was formed.

We all knew families where, despite one parent having a mother tongue other than English, the children spoke only English. We all wanted to avoid this outcome in our own families. We had all turned to official sources of information, such as health visitors, and had been given very limited advice. Most health visitors will give some good, but very basic, guidance: "Speak your first/most fluent language to your child", but will not go much beyond that. Most of our sources of advice were themselves so uncertain that they inspired little or no confidence. Waltham Forest's Speech Therapy service is good, and it does have bilingualism specialists.

However, they only really get involved when there are concerns about a particular child's speech development. Many of our questions remained unanswered. Some of us had started to buy books, or borrow them from the local library, but this was slow and uncertain too; many were based on family situations different from our own, and different books gave different advice. We didn't know what advice to trust.

The group started off very informally as an email list. We would all send in questions, ask for or offer each other advice, as well as tell each other about our children's progress, or lack of it, in their various languages.

In 2003, 25 people squeezed into one member's front room. It became clear that we couldn't carry on meeting in people's houses. There just wasn't room. We got some very useful advice from *Voluntary Action Waltham Forest* about establishing a group which had a constitution, and which could therefore raise small amounts of money and hire a room to meet in.

In June 2003 we held our first drop in event, successfully applied for a small Lottery (*Awards for All*) grant, and began to organise speakers and more regular drop in events. Three years on, we now have over 50 families as members, we run a drop in event each month, and have invited 7 expert speakers to our meetings (including Colin Baker, Ginny Gathercole, Charmian Kenner, Li Wei and

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Jean-Marc Dewaele). We have developed a workshop, run by parents for parents, based on all our members' experiences, as well as our reading and the speakers we have heard over 4 years. One exercise, for example, is a list of statements made about bilingualism. Participants are asked to decide whether each is true or false, and we then discuss the answers. We have a mini-library, and have developed a website which includes tips for families new to the subject, and for those who can't get to a workshop.

So, if you are a multilingual family and are just starting out, what advice would we give you?

- **Every family is different.** There is no "off the shelf" solution. You need to work out what feels right, and what works for you, and for your family.

- **Don't accept advice to stop speaking your language(s) from non-specialists in bilingualism.** This applies whether it is from a doctor, teacher, health visitor or midwife. Ask to be referred to a speech therapist specialising in bilingualism, and discuss your situation in detail with him/her before you stop speaking your language(s). In almost all circumstances s/he will advise you to do exactly the opposite.

If other groups were to emerge, it might be possible one day to [...] challenge the overwhelming monolingual point of view that exists in the UK today...

- **Speak your mother tongue, or most fluent language, to your children.** Children will pick up the majority language incredibly quickly via child care, playgroups, or nursery. It is probably wise to try to make sure your child has some access to the majority language before they start school. In the end they are much more likely to lose their second language than they are to suffer through not speaking the major-

ity language at an early age.

- **Agree on a consistent system if using more than one language in the family.** Possible systems include one person – one language, one place – one language etc. Which system you pick is less important than having some system that you stick to (particularly in the early stages).
- **More input = more output.** This applies both in terms of quality and quantity. Simply, the more you put in, the more output in either language you should get.
- **There are a wide variety of resources that you can turn to.** These range from books, videos, DVDs, computer games, through minority language child carers, au pairs, visits to relatives and friends.
- **Set yourself a goal and decide how important this is to you.** Do you want your child to be able to speak and understand only? Do you want them to be able to read a newspaper, write a letter, hold down a job? The higher your goals, the more effort you will need to put into it, and the more sacrifices you may have to make – a holiday in a country speaking your language instead of the Caribbean? A Saturday school in your language instead of football, drama, piano or ballet?

Letters



Signing as Bilingual Language Aid? – a response

The article on signing by Sydelle Holmgaard [BFN 23:4] struck our attention. We are an English-German family living in Germany. Although our home-language had already been English, we had a number of reasons to continue with this approach with our two sons Lucas (3) and Paul (1). To give English a

chance to really become one of their mother tongues, we wanted to increase the amount and levels of input they were exposed to. We thought that, from very early on, German would dominate many areas of their lives, and they could be likely to reject English, especially because they see us using German in our daily life. With both parents speaking English at home, we thought it less likely that they could refuse to speak English completely. We also thought it more likely that they might use English with each other.

To finally get back to signing: I had noticed in my own behaviour towards Lucas that I used many gestures, most of which consistently reoccurred, e.g. when I pointed out that something was hot, I pulled back and kind of waved my open hand. When Lucas was about 10 months, many people commented on his strong tendency to use facial expressions and hand gestures when trying to communicate. When he saw something interesting, he shaped his lips to a very pointed "o" with his eyes wide open, later on also voicing a long "oooo". When he saw candles burning, or a mug of hot coffee, he imitated my gesture described above. I thought that he had just discovered for himself a way to express himself, since these gestures seemed to be

understood by all people, whether they spoke English or German. The article made me think that maybe we supported this with using some gestures consistently.

Thinking back over Lucas' language development, I can imagine very well that one could support bilingual children's language development by signing, and also ease some of their frustration by offering them a way out of their silence. Had we used signing longer, and more consistently, this might have eased some of Lucas' fits of anger when the words would not come fast enough.

Paul is now starting to communicate with us by using hand gestures, not because we've tried signing yet, but because we played the usual baby-games with him, like waving bye-bye and hello, clapping hands etc. He seems to enjoy it since he sometimes looks at me from the pram and claps his hands or spontaneously waves at Papa, smiling when we respond with the same gestures. We would like to try signing now more consistently with Paul (and try to incorporate Lucas in the signing communication) and we would like to thank Sydelle, and the BFN, for the interesting input.

Saskia Malan, Germany

- **Finally and most importantly, don't give up.** Most children in bilingual families who end up monolingual do so because, during a bad patch, the parents gave up. There will be ups and downs. Children will resist and play power games with the languages in the family, but if you continue to show the children how important this is to you, without forcing them to speak, they will usually agree to cooperate in the end.

We feel that we have gained a lot though our group, and we are surprised that other similar groups have not sprung up elsewhere. Of course there are lots of groups based on particular languages or communities, but we are not aware of any in the UK that welcome members speaking *all* languages where the common factor is our commitment to bilingualism and retaining our children's heritage, whatever the language involved. Our group's open policy means that communities that are too small to form their own language-specific group can participate. The one slightly ironic downside is that, of course, when we meet up, the one language all the children have in common is English. However, this is easily outweighed by the advantages that families feel they have gained through belonging to the group – either because of changing their approach, or gaining confidence that their current approach is the right one.



If other groups were to emerge, it might be possible to not just support groups of families in various areas, but also to challenge the overwhelming monolingual point of view that exists in the UK today. We would love to try and ensure that bilingual children are mentioned in the media, and that those who set policy on childcare and education are aware of bilingual children and take them into account. It only takes a nucleus of 3 or 4 motivated families to start a group. We are more than happy to share what we have learnt, and to answer any questions from others who might be interested in doing the same.

You can contact the Waltham Forest Bilingual Group via email: info@wfbilingual.org.uk
More details and advice for bilingual families is also available at their website:

www.wfbilingual.org.uk

Photo credits: Isabelle Merminod

Notes from the OPOL Family



Mathematically Challenged Mother

Suzanne Barron-Hauwert

Maths was my worst subject at school, so I am amazed that my two eldest children, Marc and Nina, say that it is their favourite. After moving to America we have had to re-learn counting. Inches, feet and cups are used in cooking. Americans drive on the right, like France, but they use miles, like we do in England. Gallons are for milk here, rather than for petrol. I learnt these measurements at school over 25 years ago, before we converted to metric systems, but I have no idea how many pounds I weigh. In shoes, Nina is an American size 2, while in the UK she is a 13 and in Europe a 33. Sales assistants are baffled that I don't know my kids shoes sizes off by heart. We have also been caught out by the reverse day/month order here. Marc, who was born on the 3rd of January, has been typed into several computers at the 1st of March.

Then there is the age question. When I first met Jacques, his family and friends asked me how old I was. Being two years older than him, I tried for a vague 'twenty-something' but the exact year of birth was what they wanted. The required answer was '67' which sounded most peculiar to me. So, when I would ask new friends the same question, they would give me a double-digit number, but before I had subtracted it from the current year they were gone. I have since applied the logic that hearing 'seventy-something' means the person is 'thirty-something' and a '...ninety-something' or 'deux-mille-something' is a young child. When people ask me the age of my children, I have to take a deep breath. Marc was born in 1997, which makes the awfully long 'Dix-neuf-quat-vingt-dix-sept' or 'Nineteen-four-times-twenty plus seventeen'... a torturous mouthful that needs practice to be perfect.

I noticed many of the bilingual children I taught did well in maths and I thought it was because maths is relatively easy, compared to language or science. The

concepts of shapes, right angles, geometry, adding up and taking away are all reassuringly similar. Many languages use the same visual symbols of plus, minus, times, equals etc. Numbers are consistent, unlike phonic sounds and vowels, which can change dramatically. So transferring knowledge of maths from Spanish to German would be as simple as $1 + 1 = 2$.

But knowing your times tables, and doing mental arithmetic in the head, is not so easy. It must be learnt at an early stage by memory or rote learning. In fact, maths is perhaps one of the hardest things to do in two languages. My husband, Jacques, who works in finance for an English company, is a perfect verbal and literate bilingual. But he admits that he still does his maths in French, translating the multiplication tables in his head. Jacques says he does this because it's faster, and he is sure to have the right answer.

Recently Marc's French teacher at the bilingual school he attends sent home an email bemoaning the weakness of their multiplication tables. Marc finds his eight-times table tricky in either language, and loses points on quick fire mental maths in French. I wanted to help Marc and tested him out that evening, but it wouldn't come out right. In my mind I could 'see' $8 \times 8 = 64$, but when I said 'huit fois huit fais.....?' I hesitated so long that Marc had too much time to answer. I even had to translate his answers to English to check if they were right.

I dread the maths homework, especially the logical 'problem-solving' riddles. The other night we had maths in both French and English. The calculations are similar, but the cultural references are somewhat different. In French, the children are asked to calculate the price of foie gras and truffles, which our children have not yet tasted. Meanwhile, the American homework asks:

'Alden has \$100, and he wants to buy 2 baseball mitts, 3 baseball bats and 4 jump ropes. How much change will he have?'

Not a lot, says Marc.

It's certainly going to help Marc at the local French market in the summer holidays to know the price of a kilo of truffles...but knowing how many baseballs you get for your pocket money is not bad either.

You can read more about how Suzanne and her family cope with bilingualism and bringing up their children on her blog:

<http://opol-family.blogspot.com/>

Spanish-English Books And Workshops in the US



María Luisa Retana is the author of seven bilingual children's books and delights in visiting schools throughout the US. She was born in Cuba, and received her B.A. in Spanish and Comparative Literature from UCR. in Riverside, CA. Mrs. Retana donated books to a program for Doctors in AZ. that promotes early literacy, and gives advice about the importance of reading aloud into the pediatric exam room. Their thank you note reads:

"The Audience deeply appreciates María Luisa Retana for her devotion to bilingual education, and her willingness to share her talents through her children's books"
Reach Out and Read National Center.

Please view our website at:

www.englishspanishchildrensbooks.com

In The News

Bilingualism Delays Dementia

The *BFN* has reported many times before on the apparent cognitive benefits of multiple languages. January saw bilingualism hit the headlines yet again, this time regarding studies showing a delay in the onset of dementia in people who are fully bilingual, and who have spoken more than one language for most of their lives.

Ellen Bialystock, one of the authors of the study, is quoted as saying:

"We are pretty dazzled by the results. In the process of using two languages, you are engaging parts of your brain, parts of your mind that are active and need that kind of constant exercise and activity, and with that experience [it] stays more robust."

The researchers attributed the results to an increased blood supply to the brain, and to healthier nerve connections, both as a result of the increased effort involved in speaking two languages.

Source: www.newscientist.com

Bilingualism in Norway: Language Attitudes in an International School

Joke Ingrid Dewilde



We live in a world where the borders between nations and continents have, in many ways, become less significant. International cooperation has become a necessity, both in connection with political issues and in international trade. There is an increasing incidence of intermarriage, people are travelling all over the world, and education has become more international. One of the consequences of all this is the increase of the importance of bilingualism in everyday life, especially in Western society.

There are many different types of bilinguals. In Norway, much research has been done on linguistic minorities (e.g. Kulbrandstad, 1997). However, my focus is on prestigious bilinguals with a Western background. Prestigious bilinguals are people who speak two high-status languages, as opposed to bilinguals who speak minority languages that may enjoy a less favoured status in the community. The main aim of my research was to find out how prestigious bilingual youngsters experience their own bilingual life situation and aspects of their biculturalism. Do they think and feel alike, or are there individual differences?

I conducted in-depth interviews with seven bilingual youngsters attending an English-medium International School in one of the biggest cities in Norway. Even though all interviewees were prestigious bilinguals, their cultural and linguistic background was varied. They were all able to speak English but for some it was their native tongue, for others it was a foreign language. Some of them spoke Norwegian, the community language, others did not. Some came from homes where the parents each spoke a different language, others had parents who spoke the same language. Some had moved around a lot, while others had been living in the same country since birth.

All informants agreed that the advantages of bilingualism were greater than the disadvantages. Reasons like bilingualism being a privilege, enabling them to come

into contact with more and different people, and giving them high status were mentioned. When asked whether there were any down sides to bilingualism, three of the seven bilinguals were not able to come up with any drawbacks to bilingualism at all. The other four found that one language can interfere with, or dominate, the other.

It has often been noted that, in some parts of the world (e.g. parts of Africa and Asia), raising children as bilinguals is the norm, rather than the exception. In these cases, parents are less likely to regard it as an issue. In Europe, on the other hand, the question as to whether to raise one's child bilingually is likely to be the subject of family discussion (Baker, 2000). However, none of the bilingual informants in my research reported discussing the topic of

None of the youngsters reported having met anyone who felt negatively about bilingualism. One of the reasons may be that they all interact regularly with people who speak more than one language.

bilingualism actively at home. According to them, the only time it might come up is when discussing the choice of language subjects at school. One reason for this could be that it is not a big issue for them. It might also be something that has always been there and is taken as a very natural phenomenon. It is possible that such discussion takes place more in bilingual families whose children attend regular monolingual schools, as it might be more difficult to raise bilinguals in a monolingual environment.

Whilst speakers of minority languages may face discrimination or resentment, Skutnabb-Kangas (1981) points out that (successful) prestigious bilinguals seldom meet resistance. This is certainly true of the youngsters who were interviewed here. None of the youngsters reported having met anyone who felt negatively about bilingualism. One of the reasons may be that they all interact regularly with people who speak more than one language. It might be different for a bilingual youngster who is part of a monolingual community, and at a school with mostly monolingual friends. Furthermore, the

bilingual youngsters in the present investigation were successful bilinguals, the reactions of others might be different if they were perceived as having language problems.

Code-switching, meaning that a bilingual may start his/her conversation in one language, then switch to a second language, is a common feature of bilinguals' speech. When asked, six of the seven bilingual informants reported that they code-switched regularly, and they had positive attitudes towards it. Only one of the bilinguals claimed never to code-switch and thought it was something that should not be done. This is worth commenting on. Engen & Kulbrandstad (1997) draw attention to the fact that bilingual youngsters may look negatively upon code-switching; yet this does not seem to be the case here.

I also wanted to know how the respondents felt about speaking a language which differs from the language being spoken around them. Hoffmann (1991) points out that some children or teenagers refuse to speak one of their native tongues. They might only want to speak the majority language, for example. Six of the seven informants said that they did not find it embarrassing to speak in a language different from Norwegian in front of Norwegians. One informant said they might switch to Norwegian on such occasions. It is important to note that these youngsters live in one of the major cities in Norway, and that youngsters living in smaller towns, or attending a monolingual school, might think differently.

But what did the informants feel about having children of their own? I expected that those with positive attitudes towards bilingualism would want their children to be bilinguals as well. Indeed, six of the informants were positive towards raising their children as bilinguals, whilst one was more negative. According to her, language and culture go together at all times and if her children were to grow up with only one culture, but two languages, this might confuse them. She differed from the rest because, to her, language was something very personal which interconnects with culture. The others answered the question from a more linguistic point of view: knowing more than one language has advantages.

Baker (2000) draws attention to the fact that being bilingual can have economic advantages when it comes to the job market. People who speak several languages are highly valued, especially by international companies. I wanted to know to what extent the teenagers were aware of their possibilities, and whether they

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Queries



Moving Again - Another Language?

I am having hard time keeping up with our family's three languages. I am the mother of three children – one girl, aged 6, and two boys, aged seven and ten years-old. I speak Finnish to my kids. My husband is Scottish, meaning English is the other language in our home. He did learn Finnish while we lived there for a few years. Now, after “bouncing”

around in different countries, we ended up staying in Quebec, Canada, for a bit longer than 2 years, which had been our original plan. So that means our kids learned a third language, French!

Now, when summer will arrive, we are planning to move back to Europe. Because of his work, it is possible that we would be moving to Sweden, but that makes me wonder how much we will confuse our children's little heads if we introduce a fourth language? My husband speaks very little Swedish. I can get by, and I think it would come back to me quite easily as we have lived in Stockholm too for one-and-a-half years. We have already decided that we don't want to move our children about too much, once they reach teenage years, so we are anxious to find an acceptable solution in the near future.

Mia Iinden, Montreal

This is a common problem faced by many international families. Certainly, there is nothing to suggest that children should be limited to two languages – many children, and adults, around the world regularly use three or more languages in their daily lives. However, much less research has been conducted into tri- and multilingualism, when compared to bilingualism, so it is a little difficult to know what works and what doesn't.

Probably the most important thing is to discuss with your children what is important to them in terms of languages, and to stay vigilant if they appear confused. It is certainly important that you work hard to ensure proficiency in whatever language they will be schooled in, as insufficient understanding may lead to them falling behind. Some parents send their children to International or European Schools where English is usually the classroom language, and other languages are supported (see pages 485, 527, 533 in *Encyclopaedia of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism* by Colin Baker and Sylvia Prys Jones). An International School would allow the children to be educated in English, while slowly introducing Swedish into their lives.

It is also important to recognise that tri- and multilinguals are rarely equally proficient in all languages. Some will be stronger than others, so do not worry too much when this occurs. You should work hard to maintain the languages that are most important to you, and to your children, while encouraging other languages as a 'bonus'.

Specifically, one language in a trilingual (or two languages in a multilingual) may be understood but rarely spoken. Many multilinguals do not speak all of their languages, with one or two being more passive than active. Also, some languages will become stronger, others weaker, at various stages of childhood and teenage years. This pattern is very common in multilinguals who move across national borders.

It may be, if you are planning on staying in Sweden permanently, or semi-permanently, that you chose to prioritise Swedish outside the home, while supporting English and Finnish in the home. You could even start Swedish language lessons in Canada, before the move, if the children are open to this. You may decide that French is less of a priority at this time, but something the children may continue to learn in school etc. The good news is that, in Sweden, there should be plenty of opportunity to maintain regular exposure to both Finnish and English, as well as Swedish of course.

The most important thing is to remain vigilant, and flexible. Discuss openly with your children what language strategy will work best for them. Also, when you move, talk to the teachers and explain the children's language history. Ask them to carefully monitor the children's language acclimatization in school. While the addition of extra languages is a wonderful thing, if handled correctly, you should probably prioritise the languages of the home, school and community.

Sami Grover,
with help from Colin Baker

Parenting a Bilingual Child with Aspergers Syndrome: An Interview With Susan Rubinyi



Susan Rubinyi is a former *BFN* subscriber, and the author of *Natural Genius: The Gifts of Aspergers Syndrome*, in which she tells the story of raising her French-English bilingual son, Ben, and how she came to view his Asperger's Syndrome (*AS*), and the gifts that come with it, as a blessing. In this interview she shares her thoughts on bilingualism, Asperger's Syndrome, and the importance of taking a positive, strength-based approach to parenting, not just for families with children with *AS*, but for all parents.

What were your initial reasons for raising Ben bilingually?

Before Ben was born, I had taught foreign language on the university level for several years. I realized how difficult it was for students to learn a second language at age 18. Later, I read that the ideal time to begin another language is before age 11 while the window is still open in the brain to master two or more languages with native pronunciation. I myself didn't start French until age 12, and only my musical ear and background helped me learn four languages with near native fluency. I was determined to give my child an opportunity I hadn't had.

During my pregnancy, a friend recommended *Bringing Up Baby Bilingual* by Jane Merrill, which provided a step-by-step method for raising a bilingual child. During Ben's early years, I also subscribed to the *BFN*, which I found extremely helpful.

Can you tell us a little bit about *AS*, and how this began to reveal itself in Ben's behaviour? Was it a problem that it took a long time to diagnose, or did it give you time to find your feet without labels being attached too early?

AS involves a unique combination of gifts and challenges, including high intelligence, sometimes musical, artistic, scientific giftedness, with a delay in social and emotional development related to autism. People with *AS* often lack an understanding of appropriate social behavior and how to interpret emotions.

Well-known individuals with the syndrome include Einstein, Bela Bartok, pianist Glenn Gould.

I mention a number of examples in my book of how the syndrome began to reveal itself in Ben's behavior. One of my favorites, which portrays both the gifts and challenges, happened during his first visit to France at a very early age. We were singing *La Marseillaise* with French friends and Ben, with his perfect pitch, realized some people were off-key (gift). Ignoring the social convention of politeness, he insisted everyone off pitch stop singing (challenge).

The delay in diagnosing Ben's condition provides an interesting illustration of the importance of bilingualism. Though Dr. Hans Asperger had described the syndrome as early as the 1940's (referring to "little professors"), no one bothered to translate his article from German into English until several decades later. The diagnosis didn't appear in the DSM IV until 1994 when Ben was already eight.

...the ability to do intensive research can provide wonderful opportunities. One example would be Ben's interest in researching every song ever written by Woody Guthrie...

I definitely see not knowing the label from the beginning as an advantage in developing a strength-based method. Focusing on raising a bilingual, musically-gifted child, rather than on the pathological, gave me a chance to encourage Ben's gifts to flourish. Just a small example comes from his extremely expressive verbal language, his ability to duplicate just about any verbal nuance in any language, as well as musical nuances. Asperger's people are often described as speaking in a monotone, but this is definitely not the case with Ben. I would guess this is due to the flexibility necessary to speak more than one language.

Unfortunately, labels too often promote a reductionistic view of a human being. When too much emphasis is placed on the pathological, the positive strengths never have a chance to emerge.

As is often the case, bilingualism was often suggested as a possible cause for

early challenges in Ben's education. How did you find the courage to continue on the path you had chosen?

I had to develop trust in my own intuition and experience. As a multilingual, I immediately had more expertise in bilingualism than almost all of the well-meaning monolingual professionals. Rather than interfering with Ben's social development, bilingualism multiplied manifold the number of opportunities for social interaction, as well as raising Ben's self-esteem. French people were astonished by his level of fluency, of his ability at an early age to always come up with "le mot juste" [*exactly the right word*].

My advice to other parents would be: stick to your guns, believe in yourself and your knowledge and experience of bilingualism, and explain the many positive benefits.

You argue that bilingualism helped widen Ben's horizons and improve his cultural and social development. Are these benefits particularly pronounced for people with *AS*, or are they equally applicable to 'neurotypical' language learners?

One particular benefit of bilingualism for people with *AS* is helping develop their understanding of multiple perspectives. Often *AS* individuals have difficulty understanding other points of view. With bilingualism, linguistically, every object in the universe can automatically be described in two different ways. Culturally, bilingualism presents alternative ways of operating in the world – to cite just a few examples, different meal times between France and the US, foods eaten, what constitutes appropriate dinner conversation etc. Of course, neurotypicals can benefit from an understanding of multiple perspectives as well, but for *AS* people I see this as essential. Bilingualism is a perfect teaching device.

You describe, in great detail, not only the very real challenges of *AS*, but also the opportunities that often accompany it. How important is it to take a positive, strength-based approach?

The gift of extreme focus of *AS*, and the ability to do intensive, exhaustive research on a subject of interest can provide wonderful opportunities. One example would be Ben's interest at age ten in researching every song ever written by Woody Guthrie, which eventually led to a conversation with the Smithsonian Institute. The collection director was so impressed by Ben's expertise he told Ben whenever he

came to Washington, D.C. to be sure to visit, and he would play him some rare, never before released, recordings.

Parents as well as children can benefit from these gifts. I never had any intention of learning about map libraries and map publishing companies in Los Angeles but found Ben's research fascinating and informative.

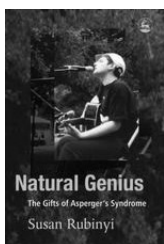
I firmly believe a positive, strength-based approach to child-rearing in general, and Asperger's in particular, is essential to helping develop human potential, both for the individual and to be shared with the world. I have seen far too many sad examples of intelligent Asperger's individuals whose gifts remain dormant, lost to themselves and wider society.

How can parents ensure that their own needs are also looked after?

I would say: "Enjoy the journey." Share your own interests and expertise with your child. Part of my decision to raise Ben bilingually stemmed from my own love and enjoyment of other languages and cultures. The French-speaking parent/child group I formed, which included singing in French, not only helped enrich Ben's life, but provided me with many wonderful friendships as well, and helped me expand my French musical repertoire. It's very important, in addition, to make time for yourself every day to do activities you find enjoyable. In my case, these have included swimming, writing, now yoga. Only by taking care of yourself will you also take care of your child.

What is the most important advice you can give to other parents in a similar situation to you?

Both to parents of children with Asperger's Syndrome and those with neurotypical children I would say: "You are your child's best advocate – believe in yourself and your child's gifts and the many benefits of bilingualism. Don't let yourself be intimidated by well-meaning but sometimes uninformed professionals without your knowledge of how bilingualism can enrich a person's life. Recognize that you, as well as your child, are on a positive journey of personal transformation."



Natural Genius: The Gifts of Asperger's Syndrome (ISBN: 9781843107842) by Susan Rubinyi is available from:

www.jkp.com

Photos by Paul Carter and Christa M. Reiff

Bilingualism in Norway

Continued from page 5

thought they could get a better job because they speak more than one language at a high level. Surprisingly, perhaps, only one bilingual believes that bilingualism leads to better jobs. Many of the bilinguals point out that bilingualism leads to different jobs, but not necessarily within better professions.

Many of the informants could be described as "Third Culture Kids" (TCKs). Ruth and John Useem coined this term in the early 1960s. McCraig (1992) notes that while TCKs frequently relate to their parents'/one of their parents' culture(s) or countries, they often feel different from their peers when they return to these countries. However, two of the bilingual speakers of this research did not report feeling different at all, whilst five of them said they felt slightly different. However, they claimed that this difference was because they had lived in different countries, not because they spoke more languages.

She reported finding herself more casual and laidback when speaking Norwegian, and more formal when speaking English...

I was also interested to find out whether the respondents' language choice influences their behaviour or personality. Four of the seven bilingual informants felt that they change their personality when switching languages, while three of them did not. An English-Norwegian bilingual noted that she is a different person when speaking English than when speaking Norwegian. She reported finding herself more casual and laidback when speaking Norwegian, and more formal when speaking English.

Interestingly, she learnt and used English at very strict girls' schools; she learnt Norwegian from her parents, and used it at the more informal Norwegian schools.

To the question "What can you remember of the process of becoming bilingual?", the answers varied according to the age at which the youngsters learned their languages. The informants who learned their first two languages simultaneously reported not remembering anything of this process.

Those who learned their second or third languages after the age of three can be divided into two groups: those who had friends who spoke the same languages, and who therefore could help them during the language learning process, and the ones who were linguistically isolated. The second group found this to have been a hard period, while the first group did not.

To the question of whether the respondents had a favourite language, or a language they disliked, they answered quite differently. Two of the seven bilingual informants do not have a favourite language. Four of them liked their native tongue(s) best, and one of the informants prefers a foreign language (which she had only just started to learn).

Bilinguals may have different degrees of emotional attachment towards each of their languages. The language the informants use when expressing their feelings varies as well. Two of the seven bilingual informants said they did not prefer a particular language when they were angry, and that it depended what the interlocutor's language was. Three of the informants said they prefer to use the language they learned first as a child. An English-Dutch bilingual claimed to use Dutch when he is angry, even if he is talking in English to a person who does not speak any Dutch. According to him, it happens automatically. Dutch is his native tongue, and he did not learn English before the age of ten. One of the youngsters said she tended to choose a language different from her interlocutor's language. The explanation may be that she is using the language both to express and hide emotions. By choosing to express a strong emotion in a language unfamiliar to one's interlocutor, one can satisfy one's need to unload strong feelings (self-directed really), in the safe knowledge that the interlocutor might only get the gist of the meaning. To my knowledge this is uncommon.

To summarise, prestigious bilinguals as a group are difficult to define, and one should be careful about making generalisations. However, the present research shows that it may be possible to point out certain tendencies concerning attitudes towards bilingualism. All youngsters were, for example, able to come up with advantages concerning their bilingualism. Also, they all reported that bilingualism was not a regular topic of discussion in their families, and none of them said that they had met anyone who expressed negative feelings towards bilingualism. A last tendency was that almost all of the youngsters questioned tended to code-switch, and were comfortable doing so.

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