Raising Your Child With More Than One Language

Take aways from conversations with Mimi from Growing Up Multilingual



"It's never just about the language. Language is identity, connection, and wanting to do right by your child — and it permeates every single aspect of your family's life."

THREE FOUNDATIONAL ELEMENTS OF MULTILINGUAL PARENTING

1. **FIND YOUR WHY:**

Language is identity. Your why is your anchor. Understanding your personal reasons for raising multilingual children helps you stay motivated and focused, especially when challenges arise. Dig deep, write it down, and revisit it often — not as a rule, but as something that guides you when things feel uncertain.

2. **ALIGN WITH OTHERS:**

Language decisions involve everyone in your child's world. Misalignment between caregivers shows up fast — in resentment, in resistance, and eventually in the child. Honest conversations are the foundation — they prevent inconsistency and misalignment before they take root.

3. **CONNECTION OVER CORRECTION:**

Your emotional wellbeing and your bond with your child come first. Research confirms a parent's mental health directly shapes a child's language development. Focus on communication and understanding, rather than overcorrection. Not all mistakes are created equal. When you show up with warmth, your child feels more confident using the language too.

RESEARCH INSIGHTS — FACTS AND REALITIES

Language Development Facts:

- Bilingualism doesn't cause confusion —
  it strengthens linguistic development, communicative skills across contexts, socio-emotional growth and cognitive flexibility.
- Bilingual autistic children show no additional language delays; the home language should never be dropped.
- Around age 8–9, the societal language (Dutch) will naturally become dominant — this is normal.
- Home language supports school language development — they are not in competition.
- Emotional vocabulary often needs to be explicitly supported, especially when a child is navigating more than one language.
- Passive bilinguals respond best to safety and play, not pressure.

OPOL: Honest Reality:

- One parent, one language is a tool, not a rule.
- Strict OPOL can come at the cost of connection if it feels forced or unnatural.
- What matters most is quality and quantity
  of language exposure, not who provides it.
- Language plans should evolve as your
  child grows — they are living documents.
- Meaningful, consistent exposure matters more than achieving a "perfect" balance across languages.
- Social media bilingual success stories
  often set unrealistic expectations

***"When kids can name what's going on inside them — even in a few simple words — the school day in a new language becomes a little less scary and a little more possible."* — Mimi**

FOUR PRACTICAL TIPS

01 — **Build one small ritual:** Integrate language into your daily routine. A bedtime story, a song during breakfast — small, repeated moments create consistency and make the language feel like a natural part of everyday life.

02 — **Use play as language time too:** Engage in games, role-playing, or creative activities that naturally encourage language use. Focus on fun and interaction — create moments where your child has a reason to respond, not just listen.

03 — **Ask open-ended questions:** Encourage your child to express themselves by asking questions that go beyond yes or no. If they answer in another language, build on it. The goal is communication first — language shaping comes with time.

04 — **Give your child the language to name their feelings:** Support emotional expression in the home language. This creates a strong foundation for expressing feelings across languages and helps them navigate new environments with more confidence.

WHEREVER YOU ARE IN YOUR FAMILY JOURNEY

Two-parent families: Dig into each other's why before agreeing on strategy. Understanding your partner's emotional connection to a language changes everything. Misalignment shows up in children long before it shows up in arguments.

Co-parenting / post-divorce: Your child's linguistic identity doesn't pause for family changes. Focus on what not to undermine. Keep established routines like heritage language school — they anchor your child through instability.

Solo parents: You don't have to do this alone. Build language partnerships with trusted adults — grandparents, baby sitters, community members, friends. Outsourcing language exposure is a strategy, not a shortcut.

Tailor your approach to your unique circumstances and remember that consistency and open communication — with yourself and with others — are key. Research shows that when caregivers feel more emotionally available and less overwhelmed, children benefit from richer language input and stronger expressive skills. This is why your wellbeing matters here too. Not just what you say, but how you're able to show up.

Stay connected to your multilingual journey — Our monthly newsletter with insights from Mimi, practical tools, research updates, and a community of families navigating exactly what you're navigating — right here in the Netherlands and beyond.

Dam Parenting with Mimi from Growing up Multilingual

This isn't about perfection — it's about connection.