



Education:

Ask the professional

SHANGHAI FAMILY HELPS YOU
ANSWER HARD QUESTIONS



Dr. Shari Rosen, Ph.D., often uses play and natural social situations to promote social-communication development.

I've noticed that my three-and-a-half-year old son's speech is developing more slowly than the other children in his class. He only speaks in two-word sentences and seems to get really frustrated. We speak several languages at home but would like him to attend an English-language international school next year. Should I be worried?

We often hear this question in Shanghai. Like you, many families here speak multiple languages or have a Chinese-speaking ayi who helps care for the children. It seems like simple logic that a child learning two or more languages might take more time – they're actually learning twice as many words (or more). Scientifically, however, there is

no solid evidence to suggest a delay in speech in multilingual children. But anecdotally among parents there is a real sense that these children start talking three to six months later than their monolingual peers. Still, you'll likely see certain tendencies as a child is learning multiple languages. For example, you might notice her slipping back and forth between languages. This tendency is normal and passes once the child has built a large enough vocabulary, usually by age five. Children may also manifest a common phenomenon called the "silent period." When they are first exposed to a second or third language, children often become very quiet. They'll speak little as they focus on understanding the new language – in fact, adults manifest a similar behavior when traveling in foreign countries.

On the other hand, if a child is having problems in all languages it's possible he has other underlying conditions and may need professional help. For children with learning disabilities or autism spectrum disorder, it is crucial to develop a primary or "base" language first, otherwise there can be implications for later language and academic development. Seeing an expert such as a pediatrician, certified speech-language pathologist, or a certified educational psychologist adept at working with multilingual children will help to decide if a true problem exists. Early identification is critical if a problem does exist.

Dr. Shari Rosen is a founder of Special Education Consulting. Shari has been living in Shanghai for four years, is a certified speech-language pathologist and educational consultant, and has two children attending international schools.

SEND US YOUR QUESTIONS.

Email editor@shfamily.com



Resources

SPECIAL EDUCATION CONSULTING SHANGHAI (Changning)

Provides multi-disciplinary team assessments, individual and group services (including speech-language pathology), and works with the international schools. 5206 6273, www.specialiedchina.com.

WORLD LINK/PARKWAY HEALTH (Downtown)

Has a child speech-language pathologist on staff at their Specialty and Inpatient Center. 6445 5999, www.worldlink-shanghai.com.

"THE BILINGUAL FAMILY: A HANDBOOK FOR PARENTS," by Edith Harding and Philip Riley, offers several "golden rules" for raising a child in a multilingual environment:

- ✓ The child's happiness comes first. Since continual corrections are not typically recognized as a productive part of language acquisition, don't turn language learning into a constant battle for perfection. Never tease or punish a child for linguistic mistakes or refusal to speak a language. Also, respect a child's desire not to "perform" in a foreign language.
- ✓ Provide a rich linguistic environment. For all languages the child speaks or is learning, offer DVDs, books, songs, games, and plenty of opportunities for conversing.
- ✓ Be consistent. This can come in many forms (e.g. the children speak Chinese to their Ayi, German to their father, and English at school).
- ✓ Play it down. Multilingualism will become a natural part of the child's life, and should be treated as such, not as something to force.

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