

# Bilingualism in children with Down syndrome in Germany

Etta Wilken

University of Hannover, Germany

## Introduction

It is often reported by parents whose first language is not German that they are encouraged to speak only German with their child with a disability. Most parents find this an emotional burden, not to be able to talk to their child in their mother tongue. This is especially difficult when the first language is used with brothers and sisters, as the child with a disability is not included in the daily communication of the family. With no experience of the first language, the child is presented with German through early tuition and therapy.

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While taking into account the differences in individual children and families, it is not necessary to sacrifice a bilingual upbringing – however, the structural circumstances of acquiring a language are important.

I have received many reports from parents of children with Down syndrome regarding their experiences with a second language, and have summarised a selection of these below:

Parents who were both Turkish-speaking spoke only German with their son until he was four years old, when a speech therapist recommended that they spoke German and Turkish alternately with him. He is now nine years old and understands both languages well. However, he has great difficulties in speaking, and mixes both languages. He uses a lot of facial expression and gestures to communicate. *The result for the child in this example that there is no clear division between the two languages.*

A Turkish girl, who grew up speaking only Turkish at home, had started talking at about four and a half years old, and could communicate well in Turkish when she started school. However, because she was at school for the whole day, her first language became of secondary significance – many Turkish words were forgotten and replaced by German words. There was 'confusion' in the language. *When the first language is not solid enough, it can be repressed by the second language.*

A German family living in the French area of Switzerland brought their son up to speak German, but he also received early tuition in French. At 30 months, he understood a lot of German words and answered questions with signs. At three and a half, he began to speak his first words in German. Through playschool, and due to different therapeutic treatment by the age of four, he had acquired more and more French. At five, he understood a lot in both languages. At seven, depending on the situation, he spoke French. At eleven, he communicates well in both languages, with French dominant due to school, mostly using one-word sentences in both languages. *Languages were acquired in sequence, the speaking of the second language coming relatively early.*

**It is important for the child that there is a clear 'person-related' division made between the two languages**

A Turkish mother wrote that she spoke only Turkish with her daughter from the beginning, even though she was advised against it by early teaching professionals and the speech therapist. The reason for her decision was that her husband could not speak good German, and the grandparents none at all. She was of the opinion that it would be early enough for her daughter to learn German when she started at playschool or school. The girl is now ten years old and speaks both languages equally well. *The positive acquisition of the first language in the family led to a good basic concept and made it easier to learn the second language.*

A French mother and German father, living in Germany, spoke in both 'person-related' languages to their son from birth. When he was 20 months old they changed to sign language, but also began to speak more German in order to encourage him. At four years he could speak a lot of German words, and could also understand French well. In this way he could correctly answer in German questions asked by his French-speaking grandmother. The signs had taken over an important role in understanding. At five years he started to use his first French words, particularly when they were easier to pronounce than German, for example 'lapin' for 'Kaninchen' (rabbit). At eight years, he speaks good German, understands French well, and his speech is beginning to improve. *He was taught to understand both languages from birth; however, when he started to speak, one language took over.*

In a family where the mother is Danish and the father German, the mother spoke Danish and the father spoke German to their daughter from the beginning. The girl is now eleven and can speak both languages at the same level, presumably according to her appropriate ability. *Here it is apparent that both languages are 'person-related'.*

To conclude, here is a short summary on the speech development of a man with Down syndrome who is now 22 years old:

His mother is English and his father German. In the first years of his life they spoke only German with him: at the age of three, he spoke about 600 words and was able to build sentences with three to four words. When he was three and a half, he visited England and spoke his first English words. His parents continued to speak German with him at home until he was six, however his communication in English expanded enormously, partly due to them reading English stories to him. They visited England again when he was seven, and he began to speak short sentences in English. At the same age, his mother began, in a playful way, to teach him to read in German. The family lived for a year in the USA when the boy was ten, and he had no problem in understanding or being understood. He also found school there more interesting than in Germany. Today he can speak German and English well, and has very clear pronunciation. He can read German well, but is not so confident in reading English. *This story shows a very positive course of development – in acquiring the first language it was clear that this boy started to speak fairly early. The second language was context-bound.*

**They start to use the second language spontaneously, usually between the ages of five and seven**

## Recommendation for a second language in the upbringing of children with Down syndrome

Judging from the different experiences of parents of children with Down syndrome who have learnt two languages relatively well, one can recognise some similarities:

- It seems to be important that children understand and speak the language that has prime significance in their first years, e.g. children of Turkish parents living in Germany learning Turkish as their first language; children of German-speaking parents living in a foreign country learning German as their first language. However, the children hear the second language and are in a position to understand it, while it is not absolutely necessary for them to speak it. It is obviously no problem when, for example, German is spoken to Turkish children in early tuition or in physiotherapy. It appears to be very difficult for some children to have to learn to speak two languages from the beginning.
- When the child has learnt the essential basics in one language, he or she starts to be curious about the second language, for example when visiting relatives in a foreign country, and begins to ask about and repeat individual words. The same is also reported from children attending a kindergarten or school with a foreign language. It is therefore important for children with Down syndrome to learn one language at a time – it makes it easier for them to remember how a word is spoken. Sign language can also have a positive effect, working as a bridge between the two languages.
- For children whose family members have different mother tongues, it is important that everyone is encouraged to talk to the child in their own language. The fundamental care, tenderness, affection and essential emotional meanings come much easier in the mother tongue. It is important for the child that there is a clear 'person-related' division made between the two languages. When the child begins to speak, at about eighteen months to two

years old, it is recommended that one language is used when pointing to and naming things and encouraging the child to imitate – the second language can be learnt through songs, little games, etc., so that the child learns to understand it without having to speak it. They start to use the second language spontaneously, usually between the ages of five and seven.

- There are some children with Down syndrome who learn two languages simultaneously, and can speak them better than other children who only speak one language. There is a vast difference in the bilingual abilities of children with Down syndrome: some children can only speak some words in the first language and can only partly understand the second language; some have problems separating the two languages; some master the first language well and can be understood in the second; others have the ability to speak and even to read both languages well.

This conspicuous heterogeneity does not depend on the conditions in which the languages were acquired, as much as on the different individual abilities of the children themselves.

Professor Etta Wilken

Allgemeine und Integrative Behindertenpädagogik

Universität Hannover

Institut für Sonderpädagogik

Bismarckstr. 2

30173 Hannover

Tel: 0511 / 762 - 8361

Fax: 0511 / 762 - 8408

E-mail:

wilken@erz.uni-hannover.de