



How to Develop

**YOUR CHILD'S
HOME LANGUAGE(S)**

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Thank you!



Hello! Mary-Pat from Talk Nua here. Thank you so much for buying this e-book. Developing your child's language is like gardening. You prepare the soil, plant the seeds, tend them carefully providing water and light. And then you wait for them to grow. Sometimes, it doesn't go according to plan but ultimately, all you can control are your own actions.

In this e-book you'll find the latest research on how to develop your child's language or languages. Plus ideas from my own experience and what has worked for other parents.

There are lots of ideas in here. Just pick what you like the sound of or what you think you can manage. One idea at a time. Give it plenty of time to work. And leave out whatever doesn't ring true for you.

What's this and who is she anyway?

Okay so you might be wondering '*Who's writing this?*' My name is Mary-Pat O Malley-Keighran. I live in Ireland. I'm a registered speech & language pathologist, lecturer, author, & researcher with over 20 years of experience of working with families. My love of multilingualism all started I reckon when a family of Cambodian refugees moved into our neighbourhood when I was about 8 years old. At first, they didn't speak English. My mother and myself were recently reminiscing about the day I brought their sick baby home to our house, hidden under my red coat! The children's mother never learned a lot



of English but she managed to communicate to me that she needed help. And we brought the baby to the hospital. The mother's distress certainly made an impact on me.

English is my first language. I can manage conversation & basic reading in Irish & Spanish. My comprehension of French isn't too bad but my expression is slow and I'm self-conscious about my accent. I know some phrases in Swedish, Maori, and Polish. My little girl goes to an Irish language school but my identity isn't strongly connected to the Irish language. It's a minority language here in Ireland & our country's first official language. We rarely speak Irish at home. Although I'm working on that! My daughter responds to me in English when I talk to her in Irish and often tells me to stop speaking Irish but that doesn't bother me. We just love languages in our house- my husband is learning Japanese *kanji* & he's teaching her too- they have great fun picking out the *kanji* she wants to know like *little girl*, *pink*, *flower* and *giraffe*! So that's basically where I'm coming from.

What does the research say?

One of my favourite people on this topic is Colin Baker. His book for parents and teachers answers so many questions. (I've put the details in the list of Resources at the end of the book) He makes the point that home languages are like the moon. They wax and wane; come and go. Languages don't stay the same or equal over time. It's very normal for the strengths of a person's languages to vary over time & place. The variation can come from:

- more or less exposure to one language
- if siblings arrive
- when day care or schooling starts,
- when different friendships develop



Language dominance and/or preference can change as a result of these factors. A child might pick one language over another in different circumstances. Their confidence can affect their choices too. I've noticed that my little girl is quite self-conscious about speaking Irish with me. It's so unfamiliar to her to speak it at home & this can explain some of her reluctance. Yet she speaks it with great enthusiasm at school. It's not the language of our emotional connection though. I can see her use an occasional word in Irish and immediately translate it into English. Young children want to get their message across & tend to be practical in their approach. So they'll do whatever it takes to get their message across. For them, early on at least, it's about successful communication rather than language.

It's also important not to turn things into a power struggle as it's just not worth it. Developing your child's understanding of their home language is doable. Getting them to use it, is another story...

How to make them love your language (s)

There's no magic formula I'm afraid. It's a long term goal & you need lots of ideas to help along the way. You want to give high quality input in terms of language & communication opportunities. That's all you have control over. Children learn to communicate gradually via the people important to them, especially their parents. They're free to communicate in whatever language they choose & while it may drive you nuts or make you feel disheartened, you can only control your own input and *stick-with-it-ness*. (Not sure that's a word but you know what I mean!)

There's no reason to give up the home language just because your child isn't using it. **It's really important that they keep hearing the home language regularly.** That way, their understanding keeps growing. They're still storing



the language & they can activate it in the future when they want to. It's critical to keep up exposure to your home language because it's vulnerable to being lost if you stop speaking it.

Of course it's upsetting when your child doesn't speak your language. But it's really important to stick with it & think long term. If you stop speaking your home language to them, then that language can be lost quite quickly. Colin Baker says that the best choice is for you to keep using your preferred language even if your child doesn't respond in it. At least that way, they are still becoming bilingual, even if it's passive.

Keep your own reaction to the language that your child chooses to respond to you in low-key. It's a bit like your daughter having a boyfriend that you don't approve of- the sure fire way to make them even more attached to each other is to openly disapprove & try to prevent them from seeing each other! My little girl was quite resistant to speaking Irish in the Irish language pre-school she attended. She knew the teachers were bilingual & understood her. Sometimes I think she spoke it accidentally when she wasn't paying attention. And I think she wasn't that confident about it either. At home then, if I spoke to her in Irish when she was a pre-schooler, she might say '*What does that mean?*' & lately it's been '*Don't say it like that!*' I generally pass no remarks on it & the other day she did a song in Irish of her own accord & seemed delighted with herself. She also seemed to think she was teaching me something I didn't know which she also enjoyed!! Then I realised she's acquiring the local accent which is different to mine (she has started correcting my pronunciation!) and felt a pang of '*Oh no! I prefer my accent!*' But I have to accept that that is the way it goes. Languages are fluid. They vary & this was a moment for accepting what I couldn't change!



Personality, motivation, & attitude factors are also important. Young children are aware of the pecking order of languages in your family & your community. Change of language use may be temporary because of

- peer group culture
- a symbol of growing emotional & social independence from parents & family life,
- growing self-assertiveness & the need for a distinct, independent self-identity from the family.

Children often don't want to appear different. They might want to fit in with their friends. This might mean that they stop using their home language. Especially if there have been negative comments about their home language in the playground.

Colin Baker also says that you need to have faith, hope, & love. **All you can do is provide the best language conditions that you can.** Then your child can make up their own mind about their languages. You have to be the gardener who prepares the ground, sows the seeds, & provides the best environment for language growth. You can't force it or have control over its final blossoming. (Bummer, I know!)

Who has the problem?

In Dr. Thomas Gordon's book *Parent Effectiveness Training*, he talks about this idea of 'Who has the problem?' When it comes to your child not speaking your language, I'm afraid it's you that has the problem. How do you handle it? Well Dr. G. suggests using *I*-Messages. These tell your child how their behaviour makes you feel. There are 3 essential components:

#1 A description of the behaviour that bothers you,

#2 your feeling, and,

#3 the effect your child's behaviour has on you



For example: **1) *When you don't want to try on these new jeans, 2) I'm afraid to buy them 3) because if they don't fit, I'll have to go back to the shop and exchange them.*** You can make up your own version in relation to the home language. It needs to be authentic to your feelings and your situation. There's no standard response for that.

What to do when your child answers you in the community language

Some people pretend they don't understand. For me, this isn't a great option because it's not genuine. Children will often see through this tactic. If you genuinely don't understand, that's a different story. Or if you pretend playfully & obviously; that can keep things light-hearted.

If you want to develop your child's home language, then great care, sensitivity & possibly some guerrilla tactics are necessary! (More on the guerrilla tactics later!) Gentle manipulation rather than domination is the way to go.

Basically what you're trying to do is to provide a relatively balanced language diet for your child, considering all the different contexts, people, & occasions where the two (or more) languages are used. This isn't easy. And it's a long-term project.

You don't want to get too rigid about it. There will always be times when you've got to make exceptions. When your child's communication needs, their friendships, & fun take priority.

With teenagers, there comes a point when you can have little influence on language usage. You can only act as a gentle persuader- encourage, offer



opportunities & possibilities but rarely can you decide, drive, or direct the language life of the teenager.

Colin Bakers says: *Not all flowers bloom early. Some flowers bloom later in the summer, even in the autumn & retain all the beauty promised in the sowing of the seed.*

So let's get to the specific things you can do. I've divided it into activities for younger children- babies to pre-schoolers/early school-going children and then older children.

For younger children it's about laying the foundation and providing communication opportunities. For older children, creating a need to speak the home language is key. Here we go!



5 ways to develop your pre- schooler's home language

With babies and young children it's all about laying a solid foundation for the home language

#1 *Look and say*

Young children learn language from the important people in their lives. You don't need anything fancy. For young children (under 1 year & upwards) you need to keep up a running commentary in the home language about what's going on around you. Look at what they're interested in and talk about it. One night when my little girl was about 14 months old and wasn't falling asleep, I decided to conduct a little experiment. First words in English tend to be made up of consonant-vowel combinations. Like *mama* is consonant-vowel-consonant-vowel (CVCV). So she was looking at her *knee* which is consonant-vowel when you say it. (I'm talking about how the words sound here, not how they're spelled). I followed her interest, pointed to her *knee* and said *knee* once or twice. Suddenly she says *knee*! I was delighted as *knee* is not a typical early word! Then I thought of *thigh* which is also consonant-vowel when you say it. She got that one too. We had great fun! That's the best way to build vocabulary. **Follow your child's interest and name what they're looking at.** Here are some examples:

- You're on the bus, you name what they seem to be looking at.
- When you're dressing them, you name their clothes. As they get used to the routine, you can leave a space for them to fill in the gap, for example, *Now I'm putting on your.....socks.*
- When you're getting them ready for their bath, you can name their body parts
- When they're building a tower of bricks, you name the colour of the brick they're holding: *red brick, blue brick, now you have a black one*



- It's important to remember verbs too. By age 2, they should be saying at least some verbs. Verbs allow them to join words together to make phrases. Examples of early verbs are *cry, drink, drive, eat, play, pull, hug, kiss*

#2 Say it the grown up way

When starting out, young children use single words to mean a whole sentence. Let's say they're looking out the window and shouting '*Birdies*' while pointing and looking very excited. This can mean *the birds flew away* or that *they're eating the bird food*. So what you do here is say a longer phrase or sentence like:

'Oh the birdies flew away!'

'The birdies are gone.'

'The birdies are hungry today'

You say it the grown up way but keep it simple.

#3 Feely bags

You could try this with children from when they have their first words & up to age 4 at least & maybe older depending on what you put in the bag.

For young children it's great for learning the names of things. For older children, it's a great opportunity for building more sophisticated vocabulary. Like words for textures (*soft, squishy, smooth, rough, hard, cold* etc.). It's a very simple game. All you do is get a bag that you can't see through & fill it with things from around the house.

When I played this with my little girl to pass the time on a rainy holiday, I used whatever I could find lying around. So we had a *spoon, cotton wool, toilet paper, a ball, a plastic bottle, and a brick*.



Take turns closing your eyes & picking something out. Talk about how it feels while it's still in the bag, describing it. So if it's a metal spoon, you could talk about how it feels cold & hard. Then you guess: '*I think it's a spoon*'. Then pull it out of the bag. Then it's your child's turn & so on. Once they get the hang of it, you can get the answer wrong on purpose which will give you more opportunities for great conversations in your home language.

#4 Hide and Seek

This is a variation of the Feely Bag idea but this time you hide the things around the room for your child to find. When they find it, you can build place vocabulary by describing where they found it: '*You found the teddy under the table*' & so on. **Don't ask them 'Where did you find it?' You just describe where they found it or where you hid it.** Then they can have a turn hiding the things for you to find- they love this of course!

For both #3 & # 4 use actions words too. Verbs are hard to learn. And for putting two words together, children need a solid verb vocabulary. Say things like *I found a spoon*. Or *I lick ice-cream off my spoon*. Or *I eat soup with my spoon*. Or *I can make music with spoons*. You don't need to say any of the words more loudly. Like, don't say *I found a sssppppooooon*. This distorts the signal. They just need to hear you say it naturally.

#5 Language dates

Research shows that spending time playing with other children who speak your language helps language development. If you can make a group of 2 or 3 children in total who speak the same home language & meet for an hour or so on a regular basis, this helps develop your child's home language. You don't have to do anything special here- just have some toys for them to play with and you talk in the home language. Of course, the more often you meet the



better it works but do not beat yourself up over it if it doesn't happen consistently.



20 ways develop your school- aged child's home language(s)

For older children, creating a need to speak the home language is key.

#1 Time with extended family

Some families send their children to grandparents or cousins for the summer to nurture both their relationship & the language. This situation is great for triggering a need and a desire to speak the home language. The language can also be associated with beloved extended family. This connection can provide more natural motivation to speak the home language.

Another option is for your child to spend the night with extended family (on their own if it's age appropriate) or if this isn't possible, the occasional night with cousins and a parent present.

Another option would be to consider the possibility of your child going to school in the home language country for a period if it fitted your family situation. Or how about grandparents or cousins coming to stay for an extended period? I see a little girl on the bus whose mother is Chinese and her father is Italian. Her Italian grandfather takes her to pre-school at the moment. It's so lovely to see them hand in hand getting off the bus, chatting to each other in Italian and saying 'Good-Bye' to the bus driver in English. This same little girl spends the summer in Italy with her grandparents and started when she was 2 and ½ years old.

#2 Language & culture school

This is another option. I know of a family who takes their little girl to a local Polish language & culture school (they have been set up throughout the country as Polish is now the second language of Ireland, after English). It's on



Saturdays & so far there has been no objection to going! This is a great opportunity for further immersion in a home language and culture.

#3 Visits to enjoyable cultural festivals

Enjoyable is the important word here! Of course this depends on where you live but many places have cultural festivals or home language neighbourhoods you could visit. I know where I live there are lots of home language food shops. These are another great opportunity for using the home language in a naturally occurring context. (See #13 below for how to make the most of shopping).

#4 Getting new stuff

Sometimes just getting some new stuff might spike interest. You can get materials that are not language specific. For pre-school and young school-aged children, I like Orchard Toys which you can get on Amazon. They have great games for concepts of colour & number & vocabulary (shopping games, restaurant games) for example that are not language specific. I've put the link in at the end. And Rory's Story cubes are a great way of building language using stories. I've put that link in at the end too.

#5 Other language stimuli:

Things like videos, songs, board games, sports, video games. With these kind of language stimuli, it's important to do the activities together so watch the videos together, play the board games together & so on so that they are communicative activities. You can have great fun learning the words of songs and doing the dance moves together. And great chats about what is happening in the cartoons. What you think about the various characters and what they have done and so on. You need to use the materials interactively with each other.



#6 Stories before bedtime

I love reading & stories at bedtime are a great way of providing quality input in the home language. Story telling tends to be a monolingual activity so it's a fun way to provide input in the home language. Now I know there can be challenges getting books in home languages. So here are some options.

- You can get wordless picture books where you make the story up as you go along. And the Children's Digital Library have books in several languages and have divided the books into age ranges which is very handy. (I've put the link in the list of Resources at the end for you.)
- You could tell familiar stories from the community language in the home language without any book, just working from memory.
- You can tell stories from your own childhood or grandparents' childhoods.
- I like *Story Rory Cubes* too where you can throw the dice and make up the story using the dice. This can be great fun as you make up wild and wonderful stories.
- I have another e-book available at www.talknua.com It's all about how to use books to build your child's languages.

#7 Family conversations at the dinner table

I've also come across people talking about how there were rules in their family growing up about which language was spoken at the dinner table. I'm not mad about the idea of enforcing anything as it makes me want to resist big time! And I really believe I only have control over myself in terms of what language I choose to use. So for this idea, I'd suggest you make a decision to speak the home language at dinner yourself without making it a rule from on high. Or you could agree as a family that you will speak the home language at dinner time. Whatever works for your family.



Another option I came across in a totally unrelated area was while reading a Donna Leon novel. She has a wonderful detective series (Commissario Brunetti) set in Venice. At dinner time, one of the family throws out a storyline & the others take it in turn to run with it. You could have great fun with this especially for older children & have wild imaginings over dinner. Here's an example from *The Golden Egg*:

Chiara set her water glass down with a thump & said, 'They all lived happily ever after'.

'Clorinda's eyes met Giuseppe's, & together they gazed happily down at the baby', Paola said immediately in a voice she pumped full of emotion.

I love the way Chiara begins the story with what we would think of as an ending. You'll have to read the book to find out where they take the story- it's worth finding out!

#8 Leave your child alone when Facetiming or Skyping

I came across this idea on the Trilingual Mama blog. (See the list of Resources at the end for more details) This idea depends of course on how old your child is & their willingness to chat! When your child is chatting to extended family like grandparents or cousins via Skype or Facetime, leave them alone so they have to work out the communication on their own without the temptation of relying on you as language go-between.

#9 Letters & postcards

My parents live about 4 hours away and we don't see them that often. So I wrote to my father who was recovering from a hip operation & feeling depressed & asked him would he write to my little girl with stories from his own childhood. Nothing fancy & at a friend's suggestion, I included a stamped addressed envelope so there was no excuse! Now it didn't take off like I



thought it would- we had about 3 lovely letters & then it kind of petered out. But I still think it's a good idea! Another variation is having the child make a card or send the postcard – everyone likes getting nice things in the mail and it's so personal. We also had a pen pal going for a while but this might work better with older children as it's hard for young children to connect with unfamiliar children this way.

#10 Five minutes undivided attention/quality time

Children love our attention & mindful presence. You could set aside 5 minutes where the child chooses the activity. Or if you are in the mood, make it 30 minutes to really get into it. The activity needs to be something that you can both be involved in so it could be a game of cards or them showing you how to play a game. My little girl plays a game with her friend that I had never heard of. (Lava/Land where you jump from one spot to the other) We had a nice chat where she explained the rules to me & then we played it. The idea is that you give them your undivided attention while speaking in the home language. You focus on using the home language yourself.

11 Baby sitter or au pair

Hiring a baby sitter or au pair who speaks the home language can be a useful strategy too if it fits your family.

#12 Get cooking

I came across this idea on Bilingual Monkeys & I thought it was a great one. So you basically decide together what you're going to cook- you may have home language recipe books so you can have conversations while going



through the book or you could look online for a recipe. Most children like making a mess in the kitchen (we mightn't be so keen but all in a good cause right?!!) so this might entice them. And you speak the home language while cooking.

#13 Make shopping for groceries a game

'Is this possible?' I can hear you asking! You really have to be in the mood for this for sure! This idea comes from Klau Veltman who gave me permission to include it here. When she does the shopping with her little girl, she asks her daughter (using the home language) to find the various items. You can step up the level of difficulty by asking them to get 2 things etc. depending on their age. If your child doesn't recognise the item in the home language, you can give some clues like what colour it is or the shape or what it is next to and so on. The idea really is that you are providing the input in the home language in a fun way. Children love undivided attention from their parents so this could be a way to work in some quality time & get the shopping done at the same time!

#14 Love letters in lunch boxes

My little girl loves this one. You could write a little note in the home language and leave it in their lunch box or pencil case. If they don't understand what it says then that can provide a nice opportunity for discussion later. Again this depends on the age of the child. You'll know yourself what level to pitch the note at. I've also been leaving notes for my little girl to find if I have left the house before she wakes up so you could try that too.



#15 Paper aeroplanes with secret messages

I came across this idea in a parenting book & I think it could work very nicely for children who are showing awareness of print & beginning to read. So let's say they are playing in a separate room. You make a paper aeroplane with a secret message written in the home language. It could be that there's a snack ready for them or that you love them. Then you very quietly fly the plane into the room & leave & wait for them to bring it to you to decipher the message. The idea is to hook their attention & curiosity & then give the input in the home language. If you couldn't be bothered with the aeroplanes, you could just write the message on a piece of paper & crush it into a ball and throw that into the room to land near them. Or you could hide it inside an empty toilet roll & roll that into the room.

16 Children choose the language

This is a variation of another idea I came across this idea from a speech & language therapist guest blogging on Bilingual Monkeys. Her name is Ana Paula Mumy. Have a dark bag with some coloured balls to represent the languages/countries. So she had yellow and green for Brazil/Portuguese & red/white/blue to represent English. So you start with specific situations or activities that you agree together (depends on the age of the child). So let's say it's breakfast on Sunday. The child picks a ball (without looking) and that's the language you'll converse in for breakfast. Later, you can choose the language of responding for longer periods & even the whole day. You can decide to do this every day or random days or maybe for the dinner time chats or on the way to school- whatever works for you.

#17 Read books about famous people who speak the home language

The next couple of ideas I came across in a paper by a Chinese woman who moved with her 12 year old daughter to Hawaii. She suggested reading books



about famous speakers of your home language as a way of keeping the home language and culture relevant.

#18 Talk about similarities and differences in the languages

Being bilingual has advantages for metalinguistic awareness. Basically, a fancy word for being able to reflect on language using language. I remember meeting a four year old Swedish boy who, when he started to learn English, thought it was hilarious that *barn* (which means *child* in Swedish) means a *farm building* in English.

I work with a Serbian psycholinguist who was describing to us the tradition of bringing food to share with colleagues to celebrate something like a promotion at work. It sounded like *chastity* in English and we laughed even more when she said that *to offer* sounded like *nudity*!! And good-bye in Irish (slán) means *elephant* in Serbian!

So there are lots of opportunities for discussion about similarities and difference in the vocabulary. And for grammar too. So, in Irish, the verb comes first but in English, in most sentences (except for commands or exclamations), the subject comes first. In English, prepositions come before the noun but in Mongolian they are usually a sound attached to the end of a word and so on.

You could use Google translate to have discussions about how things don't translate well from one language to another when you use a computer.

#19 Have a nickname for your child in the home language

The idea here is that when you call the child using the nickname, it will act as a trigger for you to speak the home language.

And finally the guerrilla tactics!!



#20 Guerrilla tactics-

Some people do this and I like the idea. If it's done in a light-hearted fashion & a like game, then I think it might be worth trying. When the child uses the community language, respond more slowly than you do when they use the community language. So you're kind of playing hard of hearing when it comes to the community language. But when it's the home language, you respond promptly.

So I really hope you the ideas in here useful. There's a list of other resources on the next page.

Want more?

I'd be delighted if you **sign up to get more tips from me**- I post every two weeks. Visit www.talknua.com

If you like this book, **please share the link** to Talk Nua www.talknua.com with your friends. You can also find me on Facebook at www.facebook.com/talknua

I also have a page on the Talk Nua especially for bilingual families. In the bilingualism posts, I answer questions about very specific situations that people have talked to me about. If you'd like some answers to your questions about your own child's language situation, just email me at marypat@talknua.com or fill out the contact form here <http://talknua.com/contact/>

I'll do the research and write a post just for you! Your specific details will be kept confidential.

Let's get talking!! MP



Resources

Printable vocabulary sheets in a range of languages from Multicultural Kid Blogs

<http://multiculturalkidblogs.com/category/multicultural-kids-activities/printables/>

International Children's Digital Library featuring a wide range of books in a range of languages

<http://en.childrenslibrary.org/>

Colin Baker Parents' and Teachers' Guide to Bilingualism

http://www.amazon.co.uk/s/ref=nb_sb_noss_2?url=search-alias%3Daps&field-keywords=Colin+Baker

Trilingual Mama blog

<http://www.trilingualmama.com/>

Bilingual Monkeys blog

<http://bilingualmonkeys.com/new-parents/>

Ana Paula Mumy Speech and Language Therapist

www.thespeechstop.com

Rory's Story Cubes

<https://www.storycubes.com/>

Orchard Toys

<https://www.orchardtoys.com/>