

What We Wish We Had Known the First Time Around Unsolicited Comments from Dual Language Parents

It was awesome to get the news that our child had been accepted into the Dual Language Program. We knew it meant that that we were on a different track but not entirely sure of all the implications. It was a new program at that time so there was no local group experience to draw on. We made our own way by trial and error with the help of some excellent teachers and administrators. We've been reasonably successful so we share some thoughts with you as you start your Dual Language adventure. Take and use what works for you and skip the rest. There are many ways to get from here to there.

The short version

1. It is a group project.
2. You've done this before.
3. Stink or Swim. (Not a typo)
4. The Superhero Squad is not enough, so roll up your sleeves.

It is a Group Project

With the benefit of many years of hindsight, some things appear obvious now but were completely mysterious the first time around. I say "we" because it really takes a group effort. Everyone in our immediate family (and some extended family too) embraced this effort although not always with the same level of enthusiasm. Teachers obviously took a leadership role. We called on old friends and made new friends. This has turned out to be a really big family. The kids literally grow up together and the bonds that they form are very tight. They know one another like no other group of kids that we can think of except perhaps siblings. The team work and cooperative effort as they help one another reinforces the family-like bonds. Next year, you won't wonder who your child will be in class with because you'll already know.

You've done this before with your child – it was just in English last time

Our kindergartener began acquiring his Spanish at the same time as our infant began acquiring English. There were many parallels and it actually took just about the same amount of time. Both understood their new language before they could speak it. We did not wait until the baby was able to speak before we spoke to her. The kindergartener listened to many hours of Spanish before he spoke Spanish. As each child was working out the details of the communication, both used visual cues and intonation to help them interpret the new language. A frown is quite easy to translate in any language. To this day, we attribute my oldest child's ability to read nuances in people's voices or body language as a skill he perfected in kindergarten and first grade. He notices minor inconsistencies that we often miss because he has been forced to use all of his senses when engaged in conversations. This was an unexpected benefit of dual language.

Being patient while your child struggles with something new was something that we watched all of the dual language parents go through at some point. It was something that we had in common with the Spanish speakers. Regardless of our first language, it was painful to watch at times. Some of us were quick to intervene. Some of us were not. In this regard, the fact that we do not know Spanish was helpful as we were completely unable to help past about kindergarten level work. Our child was working beyond high school level Spanish by first grade. While some children could rely on their parents to assist, it was very obvious to my child that he would get lots of moral support and encouragement but not many easy answers from us. We did have resources we could call upon but as he got older, he knew that tracking down Noe or Paul might take longer than simply working it out on his own. Plus, he would not have to spend lots of time updating anyone on how school was going and what kind of defense his soccer team was practicing. We did call on friends when he got completely stuck but more often than not, our child worked independently on his second language from a very early age. To be honest, those with bilingual parents did not fare as well in this regard. The bilingual parents were able to intervene and give more direction and make corrections with their children, much like we did with the English assignments. It did not take us long to figure out that our child preferred working on his Spanish homework both because he found Spanish easier in some regards and because we tended to leave him alone to do the work. Our fear of not being able to assist with homework turned out to actually work in his favor as he became very capable in Spanish out of necessity.

Not Sink but rather “Stink or Swim”

Perhaps the most important thing that we did for our child was a complete accident. We decided from the beginning that this opportunity was so important that he would complete the entire multi-year program. We came to this conclusion by treating Spanish just like English or Math or Science. If his English needed work, we would work on it. If his Math was giving him a problem, we would work on it. He might never be the best at Math but quitting was not an option. End of discussion. Our child only approached us once after a classmate told him that his family was considering leaving the program. It was immediately clear to him that it was not negotiable. He was allowed to complain but he could not quit. His options were to work harder or be satisfied with muddling through. Other parents made different decisions for a variety of reasons. We respect every one of them because we know what a struggle it was. (Remember that it is like big family) We all do the best we can for our children but we believe that if your child knows that it is possible to exit the program, they might--and you might--begin making plans toward that end. Never say never but today, we can not imagine a scenario where we would pull our child out of an elementary level math class if he were struggling with the material. At our house, Spanish is no different. We focus on the effort that the child puts into the school work and we don't focus on the grades. With enough time and effort, the grades will be satisfactory. (Notice that we did not say perfect.)

DL Teachers are Superheroes but that is not enough

Language acquisition requires “seat time” as we say at our house. That is the term that pilots use to describe practicing their flying skills. As a pilot, you fight for your “seat time” because watching someone else fly the plane is not the same as doing it. You have long stretches of boring followed by a few minutes of exciting and then back to more boring. That is part of the job. Pilots know that the boring part is as important as the not-so-boring part. You can learn a lot while nothing exciting is going on. Learning a second language is the same and we have gotten more creative over the years in how we present the “seat time” to our child. In the beginning we did tons of flashcards and read many, many books in both languages. Our house is a “target rich environment.” The kids would have to work hard to avoid seeing something in Spanish. Over time we added regular activities that they enjoy. We play games one night a week. Many games can be adapted to Spanish. Spanish Bingo and Spanish crossword puzzles are available and even create with programs such as EdHelper. Our kids can frequently beat us at Banagrams because we are limited to one language and they use two languages with ease. Building vocabulary is not hard but it does take time. We listen to Spanish music. Even now my oldest son occasionally gets caught singing something from Cri Cri around the house. Most DVDs have a Spanish option in the setup menu and once your child gets accustomed to you switching their favorite movies on in Spanish it becomes the new “normal.” If you are going to watch a movie a hundred times you might as well switch it over to Spanish language with English subtitles. Many printed materials are available in both English and Spanish. It can be fun to have the kids pick out the parts that they can read in Spanish and then flip the form over to see how the words are translated in Spanish. As a kindergartener and first grader, my son loved to “cook in Spanish” as much as he loved to “eat in Spanish.” His enchiladas are terrific. It takes effort but the faster you find little ways to expose your child to more Spanish outside of the classroom, the more “seat time” your child gets. There is absolutely no substitute for experience.

We are very grateful for the all of the wonderful (and sometimes surprising) benefits that the Dual Language Program has brought to our family. We sent our first child to Dual Language Kindergarten with many hopes and a few fears. As third time parents, we send our youngest child to Dual Language Kindergarten with a confidence that we wish we could give to the first timers. Unfortunately, there is no substitute for seat time. Welcome to the family.