

# Speaking in Tongues

By Elizabeth McNeilly

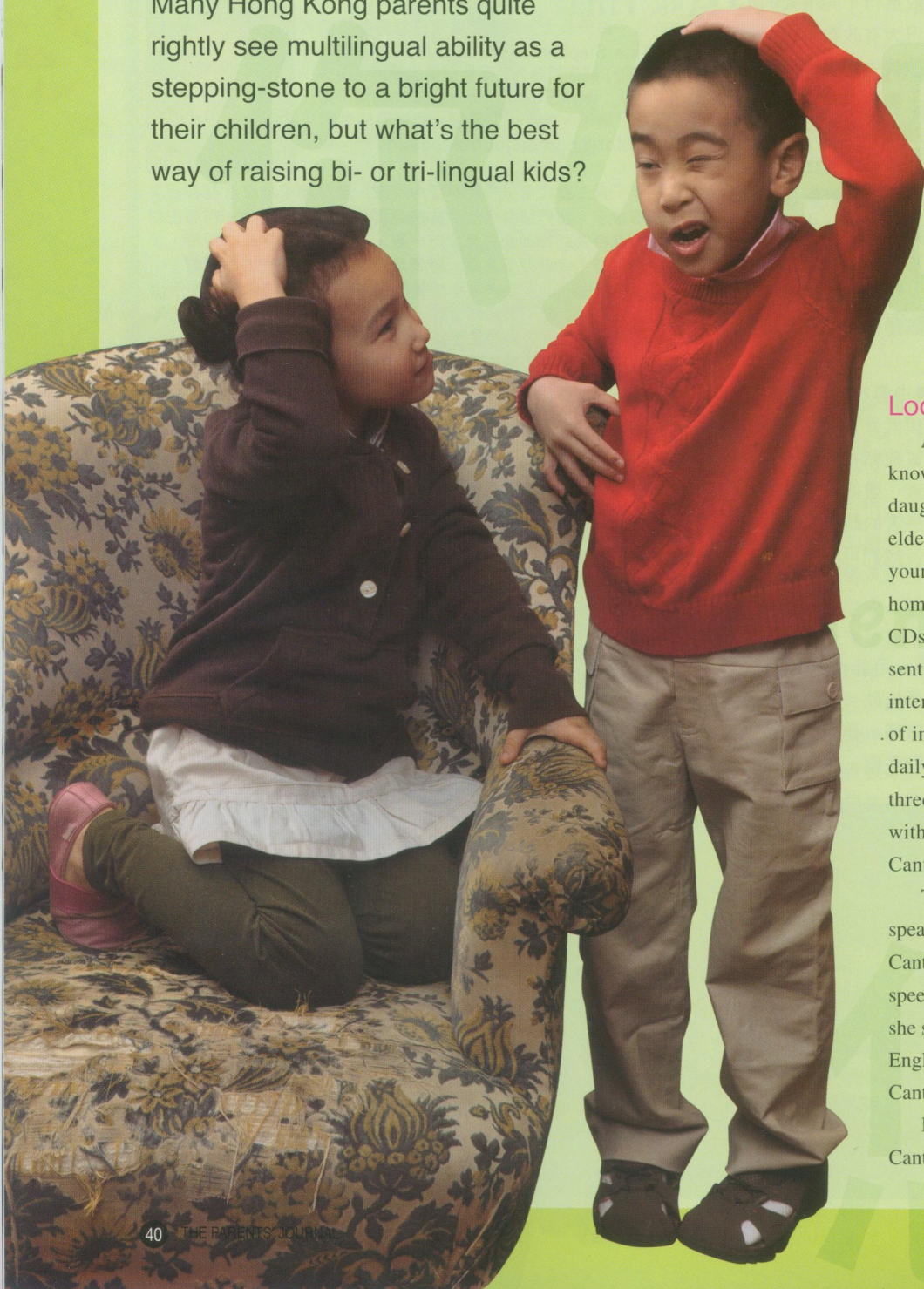
Many Hong Kong parents quite rightly see multilingual ability as a stepping-stone to a bright future for their children, but what's the best way of raising bi- or tri-lingual kids?

## Local Knowledge

A native Cantonese speaker who also knows English, Connie is raising two daughters to be multilingual. When her eldest, now four and a half years old, was younger she spoke only English to her at home and would play English learning CDs and VCDs to her once a day. She then sent her daughter to kindergarten at an international school where the language of instruction was Mandarin, except for a daily English lesson. "She can speak all three languages," she says. "Her daddy talks with her in Cantonese," she adds, "but her Cantonese is not that good, not fluent."

To try to raise her daughter's Cantonese-speaking abilities, Connie tells her a story in Cantonese every day and also takes her for speech therapy. "She has improved a lot. But she still prefers to watch TV programmes in English. And her interpersonal skills with her Cantonese-speaking classmates aren't good."

In hindsight, Connie recommends native Cantonese-speaking parents not focus solely





on a different language early on. “Let them learn Cantonese, too,” she advises. “If you put your kids in an international school, it’s no problem. But in a local school, it’s a heavy burden for a Primary 1 student – if your Cantonese is not good, you will have trouble understanding mathematics problems, for instance. And children need to be comfortable communicating with their fellow students and teachers.” With her younger daughter, she plans to introduce both languages together.

### Language Overload?

Iman’s situation is slightly different. “My family has three languages. Grandma, who speaks the Fujian dialect and who took care of my daughter when she was a baby, cannot communicate well in Cantonese. Our domestic helper speaks mainly English,” says Iman, who along with her husband speaks both Cantonese and English. According to Iman, her daughter’s language was “quite confused”.

Seeing what she believed to be slow development, Iman took her daughter for a speech assessment at age three. “The therapist said she was one year behind. She went for treatment once a week, and through playing games, she started to catch up and could even speak short sentences,” she says.

But a year later, Iman and her husband became too busy with work to help reinforce what their daughter was learning from the therapist at home, although she continued with the therapy. “She progressed, but not very rapidly,” says Iman. They stopped the therapy altogether when her daughter turned five and hired a private tutor instead.

“But compared to other children her age,” Iman laments, “her presentation is not very good. Now she is in Primary 1, but she can still only speak simple words and her understanding of maths concepts is poor. It’s affected her grade and her confidence.” Iman has since gone from a fulltime to freelance job to spend more time helping her daughter.

### Natural, Nurturing Environment

Chinese University of Hong Kong Linguistics Professor Virginia Yip, author of *The Bilingual Child* and Director of the Childhood Bilingualism Research Centre at CUHK, reassures parents of would-be multilingual children not to worry too much about any language delay linked to growing up in a multilingual home.

“Most children will eventually catch up. I’m referring to typical children who fall in a normal range. We know from research that with bilingual and multilingual children, some language delay is normal, it’s to be expected,” says Professor Yip. “The question is, how much delay are we talking about?”

If you are in doubt about your child’s language development, Professor Yip recommends seeing a qualified speech therapist for assessment. “A speech therapist can best determine how your child is progressing,” she adds,



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with a reminder that every child is different and no one rule fits all kids.

"Parents also need to consider 'receptive' versus 'expressive' delay," she says. "Many children may exhibit expressive delay," meaning they aren't able to articulate what they want to say, "but their receptive ability, or comprehension, is okay. Even typically developing monolingual children will show some delay in certain domains and not others. It's nothing to worry about."

Another thing for parents to bear in mind is that a child's multiple languages often develop and exist for different purposes. "The languages will function where they are needed and to serve a certain range of functions," such as talking about family or personal matters in the language of the home, which for many Hong Kong families is Cantonese. So knowing the word for 'turnip' in all three languages, for example, probably isn't crucial.

The best way to raise a multilingual child, according to Professor Yip, is to provide a nurturing environment. "Children are very successful at picking up languages if they are given regular input. They have a bilingual instinct," she says. "It's a very human, natural thing. A child has the ability to tell the difference [between languages] and will know who to speak which language to, albeit with some degree of word mixing."

To the idea of more than one language causing problems,

"Children are not confused," says Professor Yip. "They are able to make the distinction, because they have the instinct and they do it well. However, the path they go through is not the same as children who are raised to be monolingual. They will get there...we just need to give them more time."

As Professor Yip explains, "Children need a nurturing environment in order to grow and reach maturity." And part of this nurturing environment is regular parental involvement. "If you take your child to see a language specialist, guess what they are going to say? They will ask the parents to take an active role in nurturing their child's language development," she says. "Success hinges on the involvement of the parents, and this is built into the treatment programme. Just their presence makes a huge difference."

The Childhood Bilingualism Research Centre, which opened in March 2008 with the goal of researching bilingualism and multilingualism in Hong Kong, welcomes parents and children to take part in its research projects. To find out more, please visit their website. ■

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# 兒童的多語發展

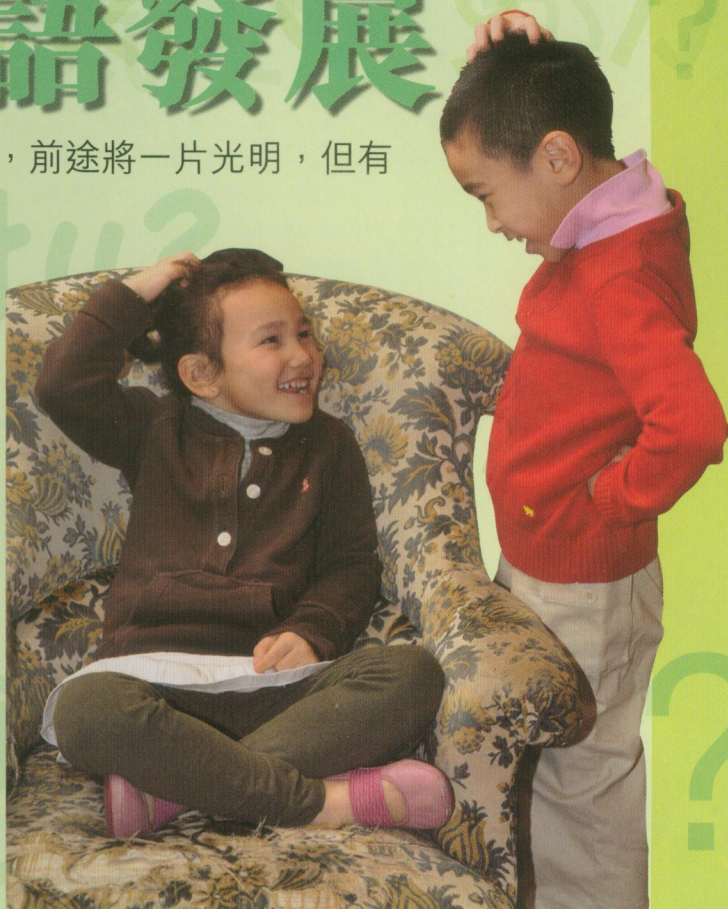
香港很多家長認為，若子女能講多種語言，前途將一片光明，但有何妙法培養子女精通兩、三種語言？

## 本地語的重要性

Connie的母語是廣東話，亦懂說英語，欲培養兩名女兒作多語發展。當大女兒（今年四歲半）年紀尚幼時，Connie在家只跟她說英語，並且每天播放一次學習英語的CD及VCD給她聽。女兒稍大便送她入讀國際學校的幼稚園，那裡以普通話為教學語言，除每天的英文課外，其餘各科均以普通話教授。Connie道：「她三種語言都懂得說，但家裡只有她爸爸跟她說廣東話，因此她的廣東話說得馬馬虎虎，一點也不流利。」

為了提升女兒的廣東話能力，Connie每天用廣東話跟女兒說故事，並帶她接受語言治療。「她的廣東話已大有改善，但仍喜歡收看英語電視節目，跟說廣東話的同學不太合得來。」

經一事，長一智，Connie建議說廣東話的父母，別太早將焦點單純放於別的語言上。她認為：「家長應讓子女學好廣東話。如果子女就讀國際學校，說不好廣東話可能不成問題。但如果入讀的是本地學校，廣東話不好對小一學生來說，是個沉重的負擔，例如：上數學課時，對老師的講解會不明所以，



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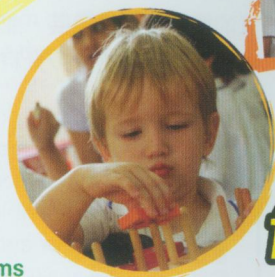
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亦難以與同學和老師作流利通暢的溝通。」Connie有見及此，計劃讓幼女同時接觸兩種語言。

### 語言超負荷？

Iman的情況略有不同。她介紹道：「我家裡總共說三種語言。祖母說的是福建話，她不能以廣東話作流利溝通，而我女兒自幼便由祖母照顧。家務助理說的主要是英語。」Iman自己和丈夫則說廣東話和英語。按Iman的說法，她女兒有點受語言「混亂」之困。

Iman認為女兒的語言發展遲緩，於是在女兒三歲時帶她接受語言評估。Iman說道：「治療師說她的語言能力較其他小朋友落後一年。她每周接受一次治療，藉著玩語言遊戲，已經開始趕上，甚至懂得說簡短句子。」

一年後，女兒仍繼續接受治療，而Iman兩夫婦卻工作繁忙，難得有空在家替女兒溫習，鞏固治療師所教的知識。Iman道：「她雖有進步，但進展緩慢。」Iman在女兒五歲時決定終止語言治療，改為聘請補習老師。

Iman嘆道：「與其他同齡小朋友比較，她的表達能力明顯較差。她現時就讀小一，卻只懂說些簡短句子，對數學概念又一知半解，這不但影響了學業成績，亦削弱了自信。」自此，Iman由全職轉為從事自由工作，以便多花時間幫助女兒學習。

### 自然的多語環境

著有《雙語兒童》（*The Bilingual Child*）的香港中文大學語言學教授兼中大兒童雙語研究中心總監葉彩燕教

授，向欲培養子女作多語發展的父母解釋，即使子女因生長於多語家庭，而產生任何語言遲緩的情況，家長亦毋須過於擔憂。

葉教授表示：「大部分兒童最終都可迎頭趕上，我指的是落後幅度處於正常範圍的典型學童。研究顯示，懂雙語和三語的兒童，預期會出現某程度上的語言遲緩，但這情況並非異常。問題是，他們落後多久？」

若擔心子女的語言發展，葉教授建議家長尋求合格語言治療師的專業評估。她補充：「語言治療師最能確定兒童的語言發展過程。」她並提醒，每個兒童的情況不盡相同，並無適用於所有小朋友的一套規則。

葉教授續道：「父母亦需考慮子女的語言遲緩，究竟屬「接收」方面，還是「表達」方面，很多兒童可能只是表達上較為遲緩。」即未能將自己想說的話清楚表達。「但他們的接收能力或理解能力，卻完全無礙。一般只發展單語的兒童，亦會在某一範疇出現遲緩現象，其他範疇則一切如常，因此父母絕對不用擔心。」

另有一點父母必須緊記，兒童的多語能力通常隨不同目的而發展及形成。「當有需要時，語言便會全面發揮功能。」例如當說及家庭或私事時，便採用家庭語言，對許多香港家庭來說，即是以廣東話說關於個人的事。因此，根本毋須計較是否懂得以三種語言說出「燕菁」這個偏僻詞彙。

根據葉教授的意見，培養多語兒童的最佳方法便是提供良好的培育環境。葉教授道：「如能定期接觸某種語言，兒童很快便會掌握該種語言，這是人類天生的語言本能。兒童有能力分辨各種語言間的差別，亦懂得對不同人士說不同的語言，儘管遣詞用字間，偶爾會出現混淆不清的情況。」

至於多種語言所產生的問題，葉教授道：「其實兒童不會覺得混亂，他們有著分辨本能，懂得清楚分辨當中的異同。然而，多語兒童的語言發展步伐，與單語兒童並不一致，但只要我們給予多些時間，他們最終必能迎頭趕上。」

葉教授解釋：「兒童需要一個讓他們成長，以達至成熟階段的培育環境。」這個培育環境須包含父母的持續參與。」葉教授續道：「如果你帶子女去看語言專家，你猜語言專家會怎樣說？他們會建議父母，在培育孩子的語言發展時，應擔當積極角色。至於成功與否，則要視乎父母是否積極參與，這亦屬語言療程的一部分，父母的參與，確是影響重大。」

兒童雙語研究中心於2008年3月成立，旨在研究香港兒童的雙語及多語發展，並歡迎家長及兒童參與他們的研究項目。如欲取得更多資料，請瀏覽他們的網站。■



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