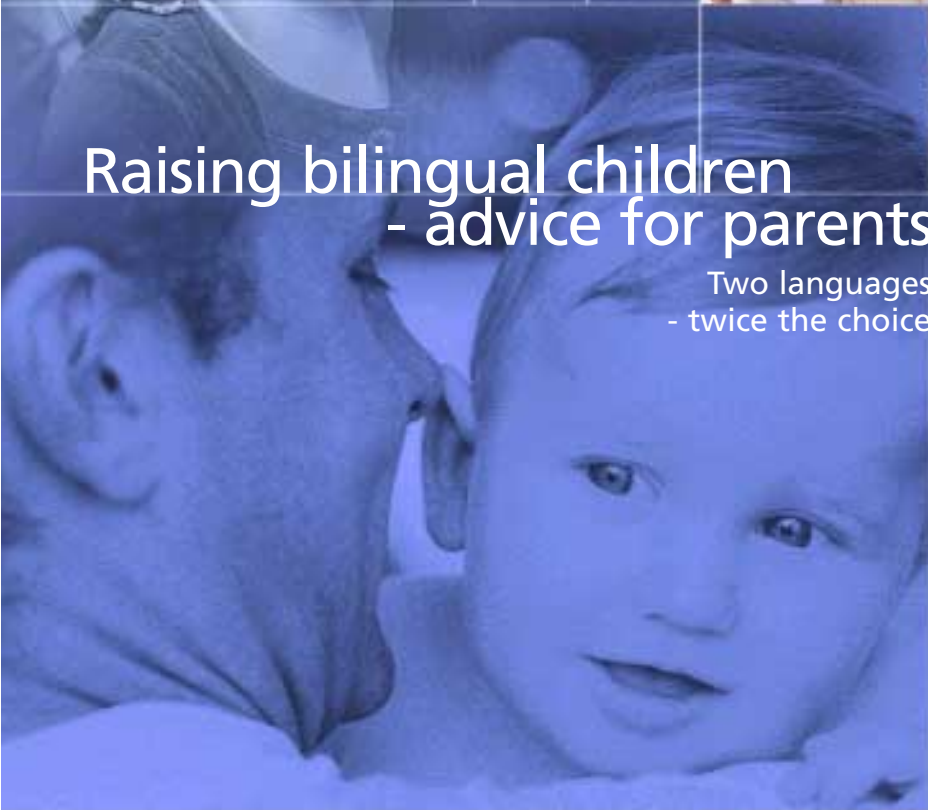




Raising bilingual children - advice for parents

Two languages
- twice the choice



The European Dimension

The European Community will shortly include around 100 minority languages and there has recently been a significant increase in co-operation between these groups. Wales is not unusual therefore. There are millions of people in Europe who speak minority languages - Breton or Occitan in France, for example, Basque or Catalan in Spain and Irish in Ireland, to name just a few.

It's estimated that between 60 and 65% of the world's population use at least two languages in their everyday lives, and around 50 million people in Europe use a language every day that's different from the official language of the country in which they live.

All these languages are an important part of Europe's history and heritage and people nowadays are far more aware of the value of minority languages and are eager to make more use of them.

Why should I read this booklet?

Deciding to bring up your children bilingually is an important decision. A decision which will affect the rest of their lives and your lives as parents.

There are many advantages to being able to speak two languages. Your children will be able to enjoy two cultures. They will also be able to bridge between generations, by speaking the same language as their grandparents, maybe, or the extended family.

There are also economic advantages. In Wales today, employers are looking for people who can speak and work in both English and Welsh.

Why not give it a try? Give your child these advantages - and twice the choice - by bringing them up to speak two languages!

If only one of you speaks Welsh, you may be worried that the situation will be confusing. You may appreciate some advice and help regarding using two languages to raise your children.

The booklet tries to offer you some practical advice and also to answer some questions which you may have about using Welsh and English in your home. If your partner speaks Welsh, you probably asked the question before your baby was born "Do we want our child to speak Welsh?"

This is a vitally important question, for both yourself and your partner. It's important that you discuss this and consider your and your partner's opinions. If you wish to raise your children bilingually it's important that you both appreciate the benefits of doing so.

Here in Wales we have lots of experience and expertise in raising children bilingually, and in many ways as far as understanding the problems is concerned, we are ahead of most other countries in the world. So, let's share this experience!



What are the advantages for my child of being bilingual?

There are many advantages. For example:

- Research shows that children who understand more than one language are able to think more flexibly and creatively.
- There are definite economic advantages later on when your child is looking for a job, as more jobs in Wales today ask for bilingual skills than ever before.
- It can help to build a bridge between generations, if grand parents and family members speak Welsh.
- A bilingual person can communicate with a wider variety of people than a person who can speak only one language.
- It provides the opportunity to experience two different cultures, two worlds of experience. It can help people to feel a sense of belonging to Wales.
- In Welsh-speaking areas, it gives people the opportunity to participate fully in all aspects of community life.

But I can't speak Welsh

There are lots of ways in which you can introduce the language to your child from a very young age, even if you don't speak the language yourself.

If you have a Welsh-speaking partner, other family members or friends, you can encourage them always to speak Welsh with your child. Certainly mamgu and tadcu, or taid and nain, can be a powerful influence! And of course, by speaking Welsh with them, your children will establish a close relationship in a language which belongs to your family.

There are also Welsh-speaking child-minders available and these can play an important role in your child's language development. For more information contact Chwarae Teg.

When your child is 6 months old, you and your child can join a local Cylch Ti a Fi (parent and child group). This can be an opportunity for you to socialise and make new friends - and there's no need for you to speak Welsh! - while your child can play and learn nursery rhymes in Welsh.



Other sources of help

As your child grows, there is the opportunity to attend first a Welsh-medium playgroup (Cylch Meithrin) and then of course to move into Welsh-medium or bilingual education. For information on Welsh-medium pre-school provision, contact Mudiad Ysgolion Meithrin.

You can also introduce some non-school based Welsh language activities into your home. For example:

- watch Welsh-language TV programmes with your child. Many popular children's programmes and drama series on S4C have English subtitles
- get hold of some of the excellent children's books, videos and cassettes which are now available - contact your local Welsh bookshop for advice, or ask at your local library.



How do we support the Welsh language at home if only one partner can speak it?

This is a fairly common situation, not only in Wales in the case of English and Welsh, but also in many other countries all over the world where two or more languages are spoken. The first step is deciding that you want your child to be bilingual. It's then important that the parent who can speak Welsh continues to use the language as much as possible in the home so that the child becomes familiar with hearing both languages.

Will I feel left out when they're speaking Welsh?

There's no need for the non-Welsh speaking partner to feel left out because your children will love explaining and translating for you what's been said in Welsh! This is one of the main skills a bilingual person has, ie the ability to transfer ideas and information from one language to another with ease. Your child will be able to do this from a very early age and you will be delighted and proud when this happens.



Do children mix up the two languages?

Yes, in the early stages they probably will, but this is nothing to worry about. Hearing the sounds of both languages from a very early age is very advantageous to children. They will very soon be able to separate and tell the difference between the two and will speak to you in the language you speak to them.

How can I help my child at school if I can't speak Welsh?

There are lots of ways you can reinforce what your child is learning at school. You can take an active interest in every aspect of your child's life. There's no reason why you shouldn't carry on reading to your child and discussing all his/her activities in whichever language is most comfortable for you. It can be very beneficial for your child to discuss with you in English what he/she is learning in Welsh.

You might also like to consider learning Welsh yourself, so that you can keep pace with your child! Your local Welsh for Adults Consortium will be able to give you details of classes.

Mudiad Ysgolion Meithrin or your local Welsh-medium primary school will also be able to put you in touch with other parents in the same situation, with whom you can discuss any concerns that you may have.

Why should we bother speaking Welsh at home if our child can learn Welsh at school?

The home has a vital role to play in introducing language to children. It is in the home that the child learns all the richness of language - this is the most natural place to learn language. The sooner the child hears a language and begins to use it in everyday conversations with parents or other relatives the better. Therefore if you have the opportunity to use Welsh naturally in your home, this is the best place for your child to start learning the language, just as it's the best place for your child to start learning any skill.



If you want your child to be proud of being able to speak Welsh it's important that you have a positive attitude towards the language and that you show this to your child. Children often demonstrate the same attitude towards things as their parents. If you show that you enjoy hearing Welsh spoken, then your child will probably enjoy speaking it!

What if my child has special educational needs?

Children with special educational needs can reach their full potential in Welsh-medium education just as they can in any other system. There's no evidence that bilingualism contributes in any way to learning difficulties. If you have any doubts, take specialist advice, preferably from a professional with experience of dealing with bilingual children.



Is Welsh a difficult language to learn?

No! In a supportive atmosphere, any child can learn to speak Welsh easily, just as children can learn any language, no matter how complicated that language may be.

I like to read with my child.

How can parents do this if they don't speak Welsh?

There's no reason why you shouldn't read to your children in English, and encourage them to read English as well. You can ask your local library for advice when choosing books. Mudiad Ysgolion Meithrin organises a scheme called Cynllun Cymraeg i'r Teulu (Welsh for the Family), which helps parents who don't speak Welsh to be able to read some Welsh books to their children. Ask at your local group for information. As far as your child is concerned, as soon as he/she has learnt to read, the skill can be transferred from Welsh to English and from English to Welsh very easily.



Will learning two languages affect my child's English?

Research shows that being able to speak and use two languages improves a child's ability to use and learn language in general. Children can learn about something in one language and talk about it in another, which often helps them to understand the subject more easily.

Recent results have also shown that children receiving bilingual education tend to do better right across the curriculum - including in English!

Wouldn't it be better for my child to learn a more 'useful' language like French, German or Spanish?

With the increase in the use of Welsh currently happening in every aspect of public life in Wales, and the increase in the job opportunities where bilingual skills are required, the ability to speak Welsh is becoming more and more useful when job seeking. People who can work bilingually are needed everywhere in Wales, not just in the Welsh-speaking areas.

'But Welsh culture belongs to the past!'

It's true that the Welsh language has a long and rich history. But it's also a lively contemporary language with an eye very firmly on the future. The language is being used by members of the National Assembly in Cardiff. We now have a digital TV channel which broadcasts in Welsh for 12 hours a day. There are Welsh-language websites and CDROMs.

Welsh is a strong language, which has survived over the centuries and the revitalisation that we have seen during the second half of the 20th century ensures that it will continue to develop and remain a language that everyone in Wales can be proud of.



General Information

Welsh-medium education

Welsh-medium education has grown and developed very significantly during the past 50 years and especially since the early 70s. It is evident that Welsh-medium education is extremely successful because of the enormous growth which has been fuelled by parental demand.

By today one in five 11-year olds in Wales receives Welsh-medium education and 460 primary schools in Wales mainly teach through this medium. Welsh-medium or bilingual education is therefore a very significant sector of the education system in Wales.

Welsh-medium pre-school education

Your child will benefit enormously both linguistically and educationally from a Welsh-medium nursery education. Mudiad Ysgolion Meithrin, the national association of Welsh-medium playgroups, supports groups throughout Wales. For children aged 6 months and over, together with their parents and carers, there are Ti a Fi (literally You and Me) groups. You can make new friends and socialise with other parents while your child plays and learns Welsh nursery rhymes. By the way, there is no need for you to speak Welsh to enjoy Cylch Ti a Fi sessions!

For slightly older children, MYM playgroups (Cylchoedd Meithrin) offer the opportunity to learn through all kinds of play activities, all in Welsh. In these groups, children are given a firm foundation, both linguistically and educationally, and more importantly, they have fun!

Welsh-medium schools

Welsh-medium education is provided by every local education authority (LEA) in Wales. If you live in an area where a lot of Welsh is spoken, many of the primary schools will offer Welsh-medium or bilingual education. In areas which are less Welsh-speaking, there are designated Welsh-medium schools.

In most counties in Wales, there are also secondary schools which teach through the medium of Welsh.

There are two categories of Welsh-medium primary schools.

- Village schools in traditionally Welsh-speaking areas
- Designated Welsh-medium schools. These schools usually provide for a wider catchment area than village schools, and transport is usually available according to national guidelines.

The details may vary from county to county, but in these schools, children will usually receive their education in Welsh until they are 7 and bilingually from 7-11. If you would like further information, you should contact your LEA.

Each LEA must now publish its plans for providing Welsh-medium education, and each one also publishes a handbook for parents which notes the types of schools available in the county. You can obtain copies of these directly from the LEA or from libraries and schools.



Useful contacts

Chwarae Teg

Companies House
Maindy, CARDIFF CF14 3UZ
Telephone: 029 2038 1331

Mudiad Ysgolion Meithrin

145 Albany Road
CARDIFF CF24 3NT
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Fax: 029 2043 6801
www.mym.co.uk

Parents for

Welsh-medium Education

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Multilingual Matters

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CLEVEDEN BS21 7HH
Telephone: 01275 876519
Fax: 01275 343096
e-mail: marjukka@multilingual-matters.com
www.multilingual-matters.com

Welsh Language Board

Market Chambers
5-7 St Mary Street
CARDIFF CF10 1AT
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Fax: 029 2087 8001
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**If you've got any general questions about the Welsh language,
phone the LinkLine to Welsh on 0845 6076070**

