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A family language

Language Matters

Each year, Aotearoa’s language weeks bring about increased discussions of and questions around language learning and maintenance.

One topic I repeatedly get asked about involves how much families should use minority language(s) at home. This has been the area of a great deal of research into what applied linguists call “family language policy”.

The name might sound formal, but it makes sense once you know what it’s all about. When parents and grandparents establish expectations of language use for their whānau, they are setting a “policy” for their whānau’s language use. Additionally, the absence of any particular rules or guidelines of language use (though rare) also ends up as a de facto language policy.

If a family speaks only one language at home, there are still often expectations set by parents around its usage. For instance, how much slang is allowed? How much polite language is expected when interacting with elders?

When it comes to families who speak multiple languages, things get more complex. Parents also have to determine

the family language policy for how languages are to be used together in the home. Which family language policy should families follow who wish to support their children’s bilingual/multilingual development? That depends on what the family’s language goals are and what will realistically work for them.

One very popular family language policy for a number of years is one parent one language (OPOL). This is what it sounds like – one parent always uses one language with the child(ren) while another parent always uses another

language. This has the benefit of much rich input for children from multiple languages, and it can be expanded (two parents two languages (2P2L) involves four languages in total).

However, this policy has the disadvantage of being difficult to stick with all day every day, especially when parents need to talk with each other, and does not guarantee children will actually use all of the languages.

Some families opt to focus on one home language with various levels of strictness. For example, some choose to respond to children only when the children use the minority language, to encourage its use, while other families decide parents will

always speak the minority language but will respond to children regardless. These approaches have the benefit of helping children to strongly develop and maintain minority language understanding and sometimes use (depending on the family and the policy particulars).

However, this is also very challenging for families to keep up with in many cases, especially as children get older and more opinionated.

As such, some families choose a flexible language policy, encouraging the use of multiple languages fluidly throughout the day. This might include reading books across different languages, talking in different languages throughout the day, listening to music in different languages, etc.

This has the advantage of being easier for families to stick with but has the challenge of not guaranteeing any particular language usage by children (note – this does not lead to language confusion for children and is the topic of a future article).

With all these different possible family language policies, which is best? This depends on what resources, time, language abilities, and goals families have. The better family language policy will be the one that works for families and that they can use consistently.

Families can also adopt a new policy over time depending on shifting circumstances (including learning another language – a great thing for families to do together). Being on the same page with all your whānau about which policy you want to try is the best place to start.

Contact us

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The Washington Post

Dreamers deserve a much better deal

Views from around the world. These opinions are not necessarily shared by *Stuff* newspapers.

It has been nine years since the Obama administration established a programme to give some security, including protection from deportation and permission to work, to “dreamers”, the young migrants brought to this country as children by their parents.

Overwhelmingly, Americans favour extending those privileges permanently, and on Capitol Hill, Democrats and Republicans alike offer sympathetic-sounding statements of support.

Yet even now the dreamers’ fate continues to hang in the balance, with no legislation passed to protect them and no long-term assurance that they can remain in the United States.

Viewpoint

Last week, the Biden administration proposed a rule that might shield the Obama-era programme, although it may not be sufficient to preserve it against an adverse Supreme Court ruling.

The only ironclad guarantee for the dreamers would come in the form of a law enacted by Congress and signed by the president. That prospect has fallen victim again and again to political gamesmanship, posturing and hypocrisy.

The problem of migrants who lack long-term documentation is broader than dreamers. Yet the almost two million dreamers are unique. Having been brought to the country as children, they were given a raw deal. It’s a disgrace we can’t resolve it.