

a guide for parents
Speaking Irish at home



by Máiréad Ní Chinnéide

Why choose Irish?

The decision of parents to speak Irish to their children is linked to their own linguistic background, their sense of identity and their own personal wishes with regard to the social life they would like to provide for their children. Many also realise that having an Irish-speaking family is of primary importance for the future of Irish as the language of the home and of the community.

Speech is the living basis of a language and without native speakers the future of the language as a medium of communication is not secure. Native speakers renew and naturally adapt a language and equip it to meet the challenge of technology, industrialisation and advertising. It is perfectly natural that parents should raise their families in the language spoken on this island for at least two thousand years, the language which is the depository of the wisdom and learning of our ancestors and which gives a specific identity to the Irish people. Parents who do this are passing on to their children a way of thinking and communicating that is distinctly Irish.

There are of course other advantages in raising a family through the medium of Irish in Ireland; the advantages of bilingualism. Parents who opt to bring up their family with Irish understand that their children will acquire two languages, Irish and English, and consequently will have the advantages of bilingualism for the rest of their lives.

It is necessary to recognise however that acquiring a language is a complicated procedure, especially when the language in question is not spoken extensively throughout the community. It is therefore imperative that information, encouragement and advice should be available to parents who choose Irish as the principal language in the home. That is why Comhluadar has produced this handbook.

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About Comhluadar

Comhluadar, the association for Irish speaking families was founded in 1993. It supports families in the following areas:

- **Information and advice**
We share our experiences and can direct you to the appropriate source of information.
- **Introducing families to each other**
We offer the opportunity to get to know other families in your area who are speaking Irish at home. Comhluadar opens doors to new friendships for both parents and children.
- **Social and Educational Events**
During the year, parents and children are invited to a range of activities e.g. parties, workshops, tours, exhibitions etc. What a delight to find that even Santa Claus speaks Irish!
- **Demanding services through Irish**
A united voice for the rights of Irish speaking families in the case of essential public services.

For more information, event up-dates, or to register with us, please contact:

COMHLUADAR

7 Lombard Street East, Dublin 2.

Tel: +353 1 671 5116 Fax: +353 1 671 0477

Mobile: +353 87 290 8391 / +353 87 230 3289

E-mail: eolas@comhluadar.ie Website: www.comhluadar.ie

A Word from the Chairperson

It is with great pleasure that I speak to you as Chairperson of Comhluadar, the organisation that gives support and guidance to parents who are raising their children through Irish.

I would like to express my sincere appreciation to the author of this book, Mairéad Ní Chinnéide, to Mairéad Uí Dhomhnaill and Máire Ní Scannláin who compiled the information in the resource list at the back, to Feargal Ó Cuilinn who recommended and ensured its re-print, to Sadhbh Devlin and to all other designers and artists who were involved in this important work.

Parents have many reasons for raising their children through Irish. Sometimes, it is a question of identity or linguistic background, a love of the Irish language or simply a parents sincere wish for his child to be fluent in his native language and able to live his life through the medium of Irish.

There is great wealth in the Irish language. The ability of being bilingual offers added language, intellectual and social skills and of course, a broader choice regarding employment. Moreover, speaking Irish in the home ensures the transfer of language from generation to generation. Irish spoken on a daily basis and the preservation of the language as a living language are indelibly linked, not only in the home, the most natural setting for language acquisition, but as a community language also.

It is, without doubt, a challenge to raise ones children through Irish, but in this book, you will find information and practical advice that will encourage and inspire you to continue or even start to speak Irish in the home. Comhluadar is always at hand to support you. We can preserve and promote Irish as a family language with enthusiasm and confidence as we travel this road together.

Esther Göbl Uí Nualláin

A Word from the Author

This handbook could not have been written without the help of parents who are members of Comhluadar. Some of them attended a meeting in which the topics discussed here were decided.

Some completed a questionnaire and others, in a personal interview, shared with me their experience of raising a family through the medium of Irish. I am beholden to them all and to Máiréad Uí Dhomhnaill, the director of Comhluadar who facilitated the parents' input in the work and who took on all the responsibilities of publishing a book.

I would like also to express a special word of thanks to Seosamh Mac Donncha, who gave valuable advice while the work was in process. My thanks also to the psychologist Martine Smith, Máire Nic Ghiolla Phádraig, Helen Uí Chiosáin and Donla uí Bhraonáin who read the text and recommended certain changes, and to Fionnuala Ní Mhuirí whose computer expertise was of great help. I myself am responsible for any mistakes.

Máiréad Ní Chinnéide (2001)

chapter 1

Raising children through Irish



How to go about bringing up children through Irish

It is generally recognised that there is a close link between language exposure and language proficiency. Therefore the primary aim of parents who are raising a child through the medium of Irish should be to provide as many opportunities as possible for the child to hear, speak and use Irish. And because the opportunities for children to speak and hear Irish spoken in the wider community are limited, Comhluadar maintains that the best way to bring-up an Irish-speaking family is for both parents to speak Irish to the children all the time. One can extend this by:

- Encouraging friends and relations of the family who have knowledge of Irish to speak Irish to them
- Tuning in to radio and television programmes in Irish and making use of books, videos, cassettes in Irish as often as possible
- Creating opportunities for the children to hear and speak Irish outside the home by attending Irish language events, visiting the Gaeltacht etc.

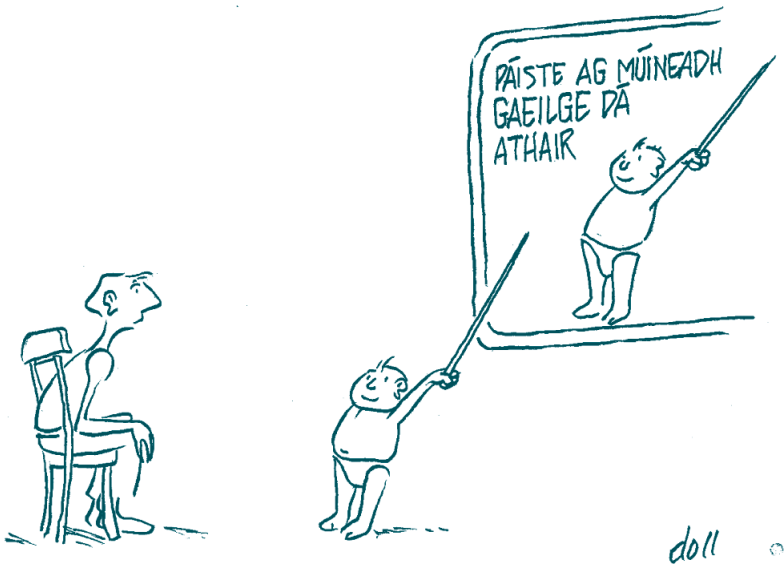
As it is inevitable that the amount of English that the children hear and speak, will increase as they grow older it is advisable to speak as much Irish as possible to them in the early years. From the moment that a child comes into the world he is listening to sounds and acquiring language. Parents should ensure from the beginning that the sounds that their child hears from the radio and television, are from programmes in Irish, that tapes in Irish are played in the car, and most important of all, that the language spoken by the parents to the child and to each other is Irish.

When one becomes accustomed to speaking in a particular language to certain individuals, even children, it is difficult to change. It is easier therefore to establish the habit of speaking Irish in the family by speaking to the children in Irish from the beginning. For that reason the decision to make Irish the medium of communication in the family should be made, if possible, before the birth of the first child and parents should have some knowledge of the vocabulary and terminology required for dealing with a new-born baby.

Not every family has the same opportunities. In some cases only one parent speaks Irish. Some families are one-parent families, and there are families who seldom have contact with people who speak Irish. It is necessary therefore to look at the various options available, and having done so, to choose the one that gives the best opportunity for your child to hear and to speak Irish.

When both parents speak Irish...

If you and your partner both speak Irish you can decide to speak Irish to your child all the time. This way you are ensuring that he will have a sound knowledge of Irish before he comes under the influence of English. It is important also that both parents speak Irish to each other all the time as the child will be acquiring Irish from listening to the conversation of others as well as listening to those who are speaking directly to him. If you happen to be parents who got to know each other through English, and still tend to speak to each other in English, it may take some time for you to become accustomed to speaking Irish to each other. You should therefore make the effort to change to speaking Irish as soon as you have made the decision to have an Irish-speaking family.



When one parent speaks Irish and the other English...

It is possible, using the correct language strategy, to have an Irish-speaking family even when both parents do not speak the language. Ten per cent of the families who are members of Comhlúadar are families in which one parent speaks Irish to the children and the other English. In a few cases the children acquired two languages from their parents and a third language outside the home.

The best arrangement in the above situation is for the Irish-speaking parent to speak only Irish to the child or children. It is imperative that this parent be consistent about speaking Irish all the time. As well as this, he or she must spend as much time as possible playing with and reading to the child. Don't forget that the more Irish the child hears the better he will be able to acquire and use it.

It is also important that both parents support the decision to have an Irish-speaking family and that the parent who has no Irish, or only a little, is comfortable with the decision and willing to support it. He or she can support it by continually showing a positive attitude to Irish, by attending Irish language events with the children, watching Irish language programmes on television with them and by encouraging them to use Irish as often as possible.

If possible the parent with only a little Irish should attend an Irish class and try to learn with the child. He, or she, could learn enough to understand the conversation between the other parent and the child, and to carry on a simple conversation with him. A good idea would be for both parents to use a little Irish together at set times when the child is present. They could make it a habit for instance to speak only Irish at dinner time.

When the child is in the care of a child-minder who does not speak Irish...

Whenever it is necessary to leave the child in the care of a minder, every effort should be made to find one who speaks Irish. If you succeed in doing so make sure to explain to the minder that you would like him or her to speak Irish to the child all the time.

At present it is very difficult to find Irish-speaking child-minders and it is most likely that you will have to entrust your child to a minder or to a crèche without Irish. If this is the case you should let the minder, or the director of the crèche, know that the child's home language is Irish and ask him, or her, to use as much Irish as possible during the day. You could lend some videotapes, or cassettes, in Irish to the minder to be played for the child, or books in Irish to be read to him. Impress upon him or her that the child's efforts to speak Irish should be encouraged, not frowned upon, or made fun of.

When the child is not exposed to Irish during the day parents must make an extra effort to speak in Irish as much as possible to him when they are at home. Ensure that at least an hour of the day is put aside for playing with the child, telling him a story or taking part in some other kind of activity with him. Keep talking to him while you go about your household chores.



Changing the family language from English to Irish...

For various reasons some parents do not decide to make Irish the language of the home until one of the children is of age to attend a naíonra or even to start school. The birth of a child is a very emotional event for parents, and a parent who has been brought up speaking English often feels inadequate speaking in Irish to a young child. He or she is however sympathetic to Irish and sends the child to the local naíonra or Gaelscoil. As a result of the parent's involvement in either of these and from talking to the child about events of the day he/she begins to use expressions in Irish linked to the child's daily routine. Having seen how effortlessly the child acquires Irish at the naíonra or Gaelscoil he/she is encouraged to decide to make Irish the language of the home.

If this is the case, whichever one of the strategies mentioned above is most suitable should be followed. If both parents speak Irish they should try to speak Irish consistently to each other and to the children in Irish. If only one parent speaks Irish he or she should try to speak only in Irish to the children with the support of the other parent.

Whatever decision is made it is important that both parents support it. It would be advisable also to discuss the matter with the children if they are old enough to understand. After that the family must regard it as a process which will be implemented by degrees and come to an arrangement about the targets which they think they could attain. It could be decided that the family try to speak Irish at certain times, for example Irish at mealtimes and bedtime, English the rest of the time, or Irish at the weekends and during the holidays, English on other days. The amount of time designated for Irish could be increased by degrees.

It is unlikely that you will succeed in changing the language usage of the family overnight and most likely that for a considerable time both you and the children will switch regularly from Irish to English. Don't let this discourage you. If you stick with it, speaking Irish will become easier by degrees and the inclination to change unwittingly to English will lessen. Make friends if possible with other families who are trying to do the same, or who have already gone through the same process. They will be able to discuss their experiences with you and support and advise you.

chapter 2

Your child... two languages?



How widespread is bilingualism?

It is estimated that more than 60% of the world's population use two languages or more in their daily life. It is in countries such as Great Britain, France, the United States, where monolinguals are in a position of power, that bilingualism is regarded as something out of the ordinary. But this is changing. Little by little governments throughout the world are recognising the right of minorities to use their own language when dealing with the State, and the right of children to be educated in their own language.

What are the advantages of bilingualism?

Studies on bilingual children show that the bilingual child has an approach to language that is different to that of the monolingual child. She understands at a much earlier age that there is more than one way to describe something. And because there is a close link between language and thought, this influences the child's thought process. Experts claim that the bilingual child attaches more importance from an early age to the meaning of a word than to its sound and that this could increase her ability to deal with abstract ideas. Some also maintain that the bilingual child has a more flexible mind and greater linguistic creativity. As a result of having to decide which language to speak to different people the bilingual child is often more sensitive in dealing with people than the monolingual child and consequently develops better social skills.

Having a second language also helps the child to acquire a third or fourth language. The bilingual child understands from an early age that there are various ways of expressing an idea and that language structure varies from language to language. For example the child with Irish and English realises at a very early stage that the verb is in a different place in the sentence in those two languages.

Chuaigh Mamai chun an tsiopa : Mammy went to the shop.

Thus when she starts to learn a third language she does not question the fact that it is different from the two languages she already has. There are other advantages of bilingualism which are not necessary to go into here. The above information is sufficient to show parents that there is no need to be apprehensive about bilingualism. And in Ireland, of course, young people who are competent in Irish and English have an advantage in the job market. In recent years there has been a marked increase in the number of employers looking for staff who are competent Irish speakers.

The attitude of health boards to bilingualism

Research in Canada, the United States and Wales shows that there is comparatively little difference between bilingual and monolingual children from the point of view of intelligence. There is some evidence to show that where children have a high level of fluency in two languages their intelligence is superior to that of monolingual children. It was thought once that the bilingual child had a more limited vocabulary than her monolingual counterpart but that was because the bilingual child's vocabulary in both languages was not taken into account.

In spite of the fact that most of the research done on bilingualism for the last twenty years, shows that it is of great benefit to children to have two languages from an early age, some people may still try to persuade parents that speaking two languages to a young child can hinder her intellectual development. The proponents of this theory are occasionally doctors, psychologists, speech and language therapists and social workers, and other specialists from whom the parents are looking for advice. This attitude stems from lack of knowledge and experience. Education in language learning and in the benefits of bilingualism is generally not taken into account in the training of the above-mentioned specialists and this causes problems for parents raising a family through Irish in Ireland as very few specialists are trained to deal with children whose home language is Irish. Comhluadar hopes to come to grips with this problem by degrees. Hopefully the Language Act that will come in to force shortly will help to rectify the problem. In the meantime Comhluadar has contacted The Irish Association of Speech and Language Therapists and in the addendum to this handbook there is a list of speech therapists with an understanding of bilingualism who are willing to provide a service for children from Irish-speaking families.

Can a child become bilingual at any age?

A person can become bilingual at any age but the earlier the better. A child is better able to acquire the sound-system of a language before the age of ten. After that age this ability decreases. Also the older the child the more events there are in her life to distract her from acquiring language. The games and activities the young child takes part in are full of repetition and are an ideal environment for acquiring language. The young child has no preconceived ideas about the difficulty of learning a language. It does not occur to her that it is possible to make a mistake. This lack of inhibition in the young child is another reason for giving her the opportunity to acquire a second language as early as possible.



chapter 3

Language Development

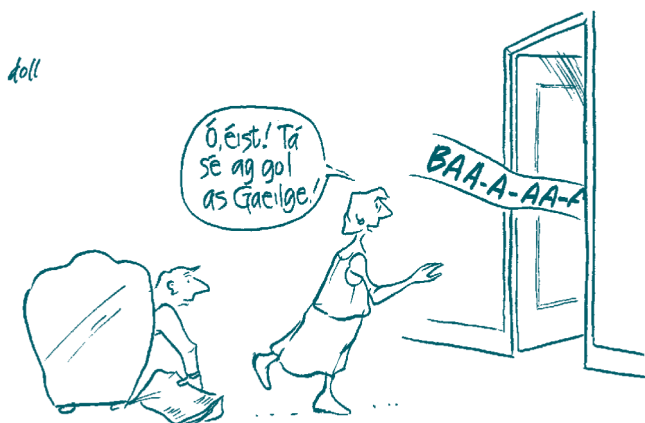


How important is the role of parents in the language development of their children?

The parents' role is of the utmost importance. It is up to the parents to pass on to the family a positive attitude to Irish. To do this they must plan the activities of the family so that the children will have as many opportunities as possible to hear and speak Irish. They must also from time to time sit down together and make an assessment of their plan, to find out if they are succeeding in accomplishing what they set out to do. This planning is necessary and will help to improve their children's ability to speak Irish. At the same time, it is of the utmost importance that both parents and children should derive pleasure and satisfaction from communicating with each other in Irish.

Even in families, where a decision has been made by parents to speak only Irish, they must try to devise schemes and strategies to improve their children's vocabulary in Irish. One way of doing this is by asking questions in such a way that the children will be encouraged to tell a story or give an account of some particular incident. Another way is to take part in games in which conversation is important, for example role-playing games in which one child pretends to be a doctor, nurse, garda etc. Games and conversations can be based on the Irish language programmes the children watch on television. There are other aids – videos, stories on cassette, disks and a wide selection of books in Irish for children, which parents can make use of. Don't forget that one of the best ways to enrich a child's vocabulary is by reading to him and by starting a conversation based on what you have read.

It is important also that the children realise that Irish has status in their own home, that it is to be heard on the television and on the radio, and that books and periodicals in Irish are part of the family's reading material. Parents must give good example. If they are in the habit of watching Irish programmes on television there is a greater chance that the children will watch them. They should also try to create an Irish atmosphere in the children's bedroom by hanging Irish posters on the walls and by putting books and cassettes in Irish on the shelves.



It is important also to provide opportunities for the children to play with other children of their own age, whose home language is Irish. This is not easy outside the Gaeltacht but Comhluadar is doing its utmost to assist in this area. Comhluadar organises events on a regular basis which provide an opportunity for parents and children to make the acquaintance of other families whose home language is Irish. If you have any ideas about any particular event you would like us to organise, or if you would like to organise an event yourself with the help of other parents, please contact us. If there are other Irish speaking families in your area one way of getting to know them is by sending the children to a naíonra or Gaelscoil.

I have a son who is a few weeks old. I would like to speak Irish to him but will have to leave him in the care of a childminder who does not speak Irish when I return to work. Will he find it difficult when he begins to speak, to differentiate between Irish and English?

Many parents, who work outside the home, and who are trying to bring up their children through Irish, have this problem. It is very difficult to find an Irish-speaking childminder. However if you are consistent in speaking Irish to your son he is not likely to have any difficulty differentiating between Irish and English.

He may speak a mixture of both languages for a period but gradually he will learn to differentiate between them. It is important however that the parents/parent help him to make that differentiation. The child will have no difficulty accepting that his minder speaks English and you Irish. But in order for him to do so it is important that you do not switch from one language to another. However, if the child is in the care of an English-speaking minder for eight hours of the day, there is a strong chance that his ability to express himself in English will be more developed than in Irish and that he will insist on speaking English to his parents. If this is the case, it is essential that you adhere to Irish when conversing with the child. If he is old enough to understand, explain to him that the minder has one way of speaking and the family has another. From time to time ask him to repeat what he has said in the family language.

If he persists in speaking in English let him do so, but answer him in Irish. His understanding of Irish will develop and you can make an extra effort at the weekend or during the holidays to organise pleasurable activities in which the whole family speak Irish.

How long does it take a child to differentiate between two languages?

The most common opinion among experts today is that the child who is exposed to two languages from birth goes through three stages. In **the first stage**, between eight and eighteen months, he has one word for a particular object or action and that one word can come from either language. He could for example use 'deoch' (drink) for a cup of milk and 'orange' for a glass of orange juice. If Irish is the language the child hears most at this stage he may not use any words in English, or likewise if he is spoken to mostly in English, he will not feel any need to use words in Irish. That does not mean that he does not understand what is being said to him in either language.

In the second stage at about the age of two years, he is beginning to have two distinct vocabularies but may at times use words from both languages in the one sentence.

"I want úll." (apple) "Give me sú" (juice)

"I don't want dul a chodladh" (to go to sleep)

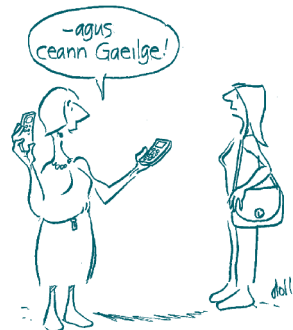
He may also apply the same grammar to both languages. A child who hears more English than Irish, and is unaware of the distinction between 'Is' and 'Tá' might say

"Tá sé cat. Níl sé teidí" instead of "Is cat é. Ní teidí é".

If one language has a complicated grammatical structure and the other a simple structure a child tends to use the simpler of the two. For example to answer the question 'An rachaidh tú a luí anois?'

It is easier for the child to answer 'No' than 'Ní rachaidh'. This does not always happen and there are lots of children who adhere completely to the structure and vocabulary of whatever language they are speaking and parents can help them to do this by being consistent in speaking Irish to them. At the third stage the child has learned to distinguish between the two languages but he connects each language with certain people or with certain occasions, for example Irish with his parents, or one particular parent, English with the childminder or the other parent, or Irish at mealtimes and bedtime, English at other times. By degrees he realises that each language has rules and a structure of its own.

The transition from stage two to three may take considerable time and depends on a number of factors such as the child's personality and ability, the parent's attitude and the amount of time the child is exposed to each language. Once the child realises that each language has a vocabulary and structure of its own, he begins to translate from one language to another when he thinks the person he is speaking to does not understand. Children are very quick to recognise the people who require translation. The translation may not always be correct. Children sometimes distort the translation to suit their own ends. Parents should not draw attention to their children's ability to translate from one language to another but accept it as natural.



My child speaks a mixture of English and Irish. What should I do about it?

As we have shown above, the child who is exposed to two languages may take some time before he learns to distinguish between them and, during this transition period, it is not uncommon for him to have a mixture of Irish and English words in one sentence. This mixing of two languages can often upset parents who put great store by correct speech. However, there is little to be gained by criticising or correcting the child at this stage. Overcorrecting could impede his language development and may even result in a reluctance to engage in conversation. It would be better to let him tell his story in his own way, even if he has to draw from both languages to do so. But watch out for the English words and phrases he uses and incorporate the Irish equivalent into your own speech when talking to him, making sure that there is not a mixture of English and Irish in your own speech. There are various ways of putting more emphasis on the use of Irish in the child's speech. You could pretend for instance that you do not understand him, or that you did not hear him correctly. You could start to play a game in Irish, or sit down with him with a book in Irish or tell him a story. If the child continues to speak in a mixture of English and Irish, be patient with him. He will gradually learn to distinguish between the two but needs help to do so. Until he has reached the stage when he is able to switch from one language to another without mixing them, do your best to address him in Irish all the time even when there are English speakers in the house.



Is the bilingual child slower in learning to talk?

No strict rule can be laid down as to when a child begins to talk. Usually he begins to talk between the age of eight months and fifteen months. Generally girls begin to talk a little earlier than boys. The first child in the family tends to begin to speak earlier than the second or the third child. But there is no evidence that the child who is spoken to in two languages from birth utters his first words later than the child who is spoken to in only one language. There is a danger however that if a child is slow in beginning to speak, relations or health service employees might try to persuade the parents that the child has a speech impediment because they are speaking two languages to him and that they should speak only English to him. If by the age of two years your child has not acquired a vocabulary of at least ten words understood by you, we recommend that you contact Comhluadar and we will put you in touch with a specialist with a knowledge of bilingualism.

Is the child raised through Irish as proficient in English as the child brought up through English only?

English is a recognised international language and it is understandable that parents should wish their children's English to be of a high standard. If the child is at home all day with his mother, who speaks in Irish to him all the time, it is only natural that he will be more proficient in Irish than in English. That does not mean that he doesn't understand English and as soon as he begins to converse with English speaking children, parents will discover how much English he has. If Irish is the dominant language at home he will very likely make a few mistakes when he begins to speak English, for example

'You made that wrong', 'You milled that on me.'

But there is no need to worry. He will become proficient in English very quickly. Most monolingual children go through similar phases of creative errors in their acquisition of language. As a general rule the monolingual child has a greater vocabulary in his particular language than the bilingual child has in either of the two languages he speaks, but when the vocabulary of the two languages are taken together the bilingual child generally has a much greater store of words. The bilingual child usually has sufficient vocabulary to express himself adequately in either language.

Does the bilingual child have equal proficiency in both languages?

Equal proficiency in two languages is rare. Normally a person goes through periods when one or other language is dominant. If a child spends a period in the Gaeltacht, speaking only Irish, most likely he will be more proficient in Irish when he returns home. But this can change again and if he spends the greater part of the day in the care of an English-speaking childminder, it is most likely that English will become the dominant language. Bilinguals are usually more comfortable speaking about certain topics in one, rather than the other of their two languages. If a child or adult attends a computer course in English it will probably be easier for him to discuss that subject in English even though he speaks fluent Irish. Likewise it is much easier for the child that learns mathematics through Irish at school to talk about the subject in Irish.

Is there any difference between the language-usage of the first child in the family and the rest of the children?

By the time the second child is born the language usage of the family has usually been established, and if the eldest child is accustomed to conversing with his parents in Irish then the rest of the family will probably do likewise. The language usage of the second child is influenced just as much by his elder brother or sister as it is by his parents, and if the eldest child is accustomed to speaking English to his friends he will very likely want to speak English to his younger brothers and sisters. It is important when a new baby arrives in the family that parents explain to the other child or children that they want them to speak Irish to the baby, so that he or she may acquire the language.

chapter 4 Education through Irish



Should a child whose home language is Irish be taught to read first in that language?

It is recommended that the child be taught to read first in her home language, provided this is the dominant language for the child. Reading is a skill and as soon as the child has acquired that skill in one language she has no trouble transferring it to another language. If parents are in the habit of reading books in Irish to their children many children will begin to read by themselves before they go to school. You can help by reading the same books again and again until the child recognises some of the words, or you could pin cards with the name in Irish on different objects in the house. Reading is of great benefit in developing the child's ability to express herself and in enriching her vocabulary and parents should encourage her to read books in Irish. There has been an enormous increase in recent years in Irish books for children and, although they may not yet cover as wide a range of topics as books in English, parents should try to keep their children provided with books in Irish according to their age and interests.

I speak Irish all the time to my three-year-old daughter and I am not employed outside the home. The children who attend the local naíonra are mostly English speaking. Will it be of any advantage to my daughter to send her to it?

Although the child would probably acquire more Irish from her mother at home than at the naíonra, she is now at the stage when she needs company of her own age. Even though the other children at the naíonra will have little or no Irish at the beginning, the interaction between the stiúrthóir and the children will be in Irish, and your daughter will become aware that other people speak Irish. And although it often happens that the child whose home language is Irish becomes more proficient in English while attending a naíonra, she would probably hear no Irish at all at an English speaking nursery school. At the naíonra she will learn songs and rhymes in Irish and the mother will get information about books, tapes and other aids in Irish which are suitable for young children. She will also meet other parents who are interested in Irish.

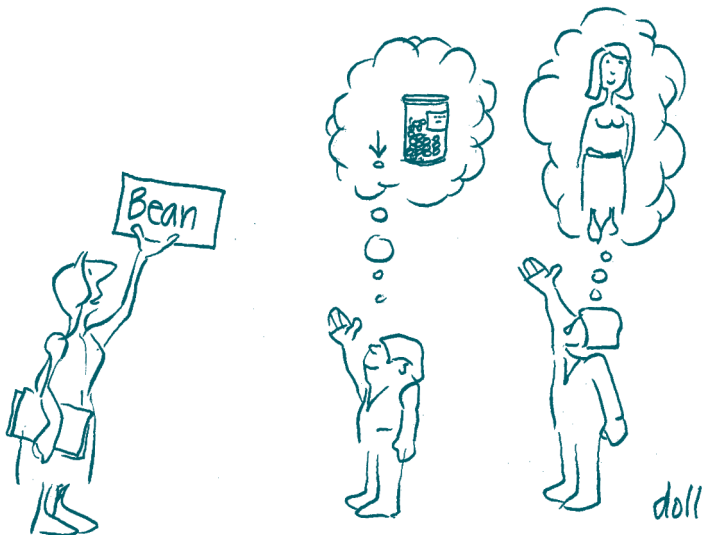
The stiúrthóirí in naíonraí generally have a high standard of Irish and are skilled in dealing with young children, but it is better for parents to find out for themselves if the stiúrthóir and the naíonra are to their satisfaction before enrolling their child. It is common practice for the stiúrthóir to organise a meeting where they explain their methods to prospective parents. You should avail of this opportunity to let the stiúrthóir know that your child's home language is Irish and to discuss her language development with her. Comhlúadar can advise you on this if you contact us.

Should I send my child to a Gaelscoil or to the ordinary national school?

Linguistically a child can benefit greatly from attending a Gaelscoil. These benefits include:

- Enrichment of vocabulary. She will learn the Irish terminology used in all school subjects - mathematics, geography, the environment etc. She would not acquire this specialised vocabulary at home or at a school where the subjects are taught through English.
- Greater proficiency in speaking and reading Irish. She will receive more support for both than she would in an English speaking school.
- Increased opportunities to speak Irish to friends and other adults thus letting her become more accustomed to Irish language usage.
- A greater insight into Irish and the world of Irish speakers.
- More opportunities to make friends with people who are interested in Irish and who may wish to speak it as their first language in later life.

It is important however for parents to meet the school principal and the teacher of the infants' class to explain to them that the child's home-language is Irish and to discuss her language development with them. Comhlúadar will advise you on this if you contact us. Before you enrol your child you should ask the school principal, or the Board of Management, what provision they have made to meet the language development requirements of children whose home language is Irish.



My daughter's Irish has deteriorated since she started attending a Gaelscoil. What can I do about this?

Only a small percentage of children who attend all-Irish schools outside the Gaeltacht come from families whose home language is Irish. And although parents who wish to send their children to a Gaelscoil are advised to speak some Irish to them before they begin school, and if possible to send them to a naíonra, quite a few of the children starting school have no knowledge of Irish. Consequently the first and second year in primary school is spent preparing the pupils for Irish-medium education. After that, Irish is the sole medium of instruction.

This means of course that the Gaelscoileanna are catering more, in the first two years especially, for the needs of children who are not native speakers. As well as that your child will pick up expressions and habits of speech from other children in the Gaelscoil who are still learning Irish, expressions such as

"Tá sé ag iarraidh tú" instead of

"Tá sé do d'iarraidh" (He wants you)

"Sin mo. Sin do." instead of

"Is liomsa é. Is leatsa é." (That's mine. That's yours)

"Tá mé ag fáil fuar" instead of

"Tá mé ag éirí fuar" (I am getting cold)

"An bhfuil cead agam briosa?" instead of "An bhfuil cead agam briosa a bheith agam?" (May I have a biscuit).

This is a natural part of the language acquisition process. The child is acquiring language from the speech she hears around her. She is not yet able to distinguish between correct and incorrect Irish and doesn't have as many opportunities to hear correct Irish as she has of listening to children who are still learning. Because of this the Irish she speaks may be strongly influenced by English and even though she may realise that the expressions she has picked up at school are incorrect, peer pressure may compel her to use them in preference to the correct Irish she has acquired at home.

Children whose home language is Irish often use two types of language at this stage, one type when they are conversing with parents and others from whom they are used to hearing correct Irish, and the other type with friends at the Gaelscoil, and with brothers and sisters who are attending the same school.

Parents are often worried by what seems to them a deterioration in their child's Irish while attending a Gaelscoil. You must be patient. Although it may be difficult at times to stop yourself there is little to be gained by correcting your child continually and it could eventually be counter-productive. From time to time, however, you could repeat the sentence correctly to her or work the corrected version into your own speech.

Try every evening to get her to talk about the events in school during the day. And remember that young children seldom want to converse about what has happened in other distant contexts. Encourage her to watch Irish language programmes on the television and to read books in Irish.

Although these difficulties exist they are difficulties that can be overcome if the school, with the co-operation of the parents has a definite plan to do so. And in view of the advantages mentioned above Comhluadar recommends that parents of Irish-speaking families send their children to a Gaelscoil rather than to a school where the medium of instruction is English.



My child is attending a Gaelscoil but even though we speak Irish at home and her schoolfriends speak Irish fluently, she and her friends converse all the time in English outside school. Is there anything a parent can do to change this?

As a first step you could inquire at the school as to how they encourage the pupils to speak Irish outside the school and whether Irish is the language spoken during extra-curricular activities such as football or camogie matches, music lessons and school trips. A group of parents could come to an agreement to encourage the children to speak Irish when they are visiting each other and you could ask parents who have a reasonable knowledge of Irish to speak Irish always to their children's friends. You yourself can establish the habit of only speaking Irish to your child's friends. If you can get the children accustomed to speaking Irish to each other in the infant classes, or even at the naionra, there is a fair chance with some encouragement and enticement that they will continue to do so.

chapter 5

Frequently-asked Questions



As my husband and I both speak Irish to our son I am worried that he will not have a proper command of English.

There is no need to be worried. He will not be able to avoid acquiring a majority language like English. He will be exposed to it all the time on the television, the radio, from others in the family, from friends etc. The skills the child has learned in acquiring one language can be applied to acquiring a second and normally children have no trouble acquiring a second language if they are exposed often enough to it.

I come from an Irish-speaking family and, when we have children, I would like to speak to them in Irish. My husband however has very little Irish and thinks that my speaking a language to the children that he could not understand could interfere with our marriage.

It is not unusual for parents to be at odds with each other when they have to make an important decision about their children's upbringing. It is recommended that they discuss with each other the advantages and disadvantages of both their preferences and even put them in writing. In chapter two we have mentioned some of the advantages of bilingualism, as well as the self-confidence a child acquires from speaking Irish fluently. If having read that chapter your husband is still unhappy with the idea of your speaking Irish to the children, you could provide him with some of the reading material on the subject of bilingualism listed in the addendum where he will find opinions on the subject of bilingualism from experts in the field.

You should also try to get to know other couples who speak Irish to their children and discuss their experiences with them. You will both be very welcome to attend meetings of Comhluadar in order to make the acquaintance of other parents. Many of the families in Comhluadar are in the same situation as yourselves in that only one of the parents speaks Irish to the children and the other speaks to them in English. If you contact us we will be able to advise you as to which language strategy you should adopt, and put you in contact with specialists if you so wish. Whatever decision you make, it is very important that it has the backing of both parents.

Irish is now established in our house as the family language but my mother, who has no Irish, is coming to live with us. What should we do?

As we have already said it very important to avail of every opportunity to speak Irish to the children and to establish it as a means of communication in the family. This however may cause problems when the children's grandmother or someone else who does not speak Irish, comes to stay with the family.

In such a situation we recommend that the family continue to speak Irish, as they did before the arrival of the guest, and that they address their visitor in English. You should explain to your mother your reasons for insisting that the family speak Irish as often as possible, but to avoid having her feel left out, it would be a good idea to translate or make a summary for her of the conversation. For example, at mealtimes continue to speak in Irish to the children and in English to your mother. You could appoint one of the children to translate for her when necessary. He may find out that granny, understands much more Irish than he thought she did. Young children get a great kick out of translating for adults, or teaching them a few words or phrases in Irish.

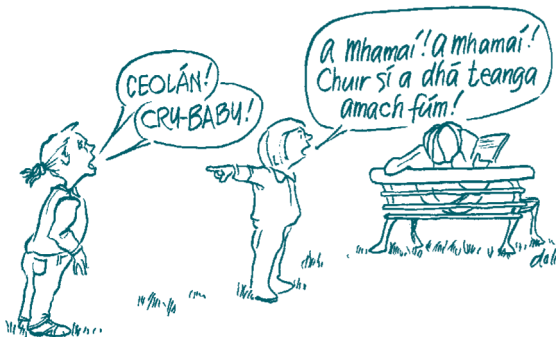
But while insisting that the family continue to speak Irish to each other, your mother should not be prevented from speaking English to the children. It is important of course, that she does not speak negatively about Irish in the children's presence.



My husband and I both learned Irish at school. We would like to make Irish the home language but fear it would not be natural to do so as we are not native speakers and have no Irish speakers living near us.

If parents speak Irish to the children from the beginning, they will not feel after a while that there is anything unnatural about it, and certainly the child will not feel anything unnatural about it. It is true however that some parents, who have learned Irish at school feel that they are not able to express in Irish their affection for their new-born baby. It would be a good idea for them, before the birth of their child, to make contact with other mothers who have Irish speaking children and if possible spend some time in the Gaeltacht, if possible in a house in which there are young children.

There is sufficient evidence from this country and elsewhere to show that parents who have learned a second language can raise a family through the medium of that language. 77% of parents in Comhlúadar are not native speakers and in 17% of the remaining families only one of the parents is a native speaker. If both parents have sufficient Irish to discuss everyday affairs they have no need to be anxious. They could however improve their Irish by listening to Irish language programmes on the radio and watching Irish programmes on the television and by reading books and periodicals in Irish. Word lists and terminology are also available. A catalogue of dictionaries is available from An Gúm (see the list at the end of this handbook). Of course the best way to become fluent in a language is by using it and it would be worth their while to enquire about Irish language activities in their area. It would be of great benefit also that they try to get accustomed to speaking Irish to each other before the birth of the first child.



I have decided to speak Irish all the time to my child. What should I do when a visitor arrives who does not speak Irish?

As we have said, it is of the utmost importance that parents help their children to differentiate between the two languages and to keep them separate. If you have arranged to speak only Irish to your child you must be firm about it and not let the fact that you are conversing with the visitor in English deter you from addressing the child in Irish. You should explain to visitors how important this is and if they are sensible people they will not be offended. Do not try to prevent the visitor conversing with the child in English or any other language but ensure that the conversation between yourself and the child continues in Irish.

Should I speak to my child in Irish and English or in Irish only?

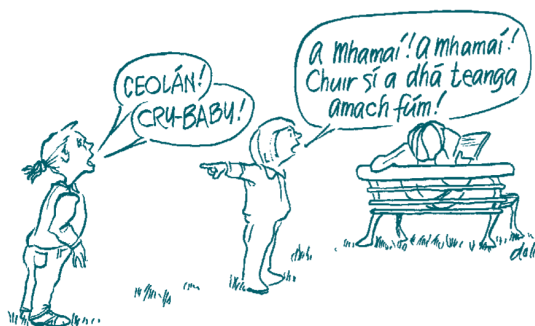
Until the child has reached the stage when he is able to differentiate between the two languages it would be better for him to speak one language all the time to one particular person. If you and your child are accustomed to conversing with each other always in Irish it is better not to break that habit. If the child himself breaks it and addresses you in English you could pretend that you do not understand him and the child may translate into Irish for you. If he continues in English answer him in Irish. At the early stages it helps the child to differentiate between the two languages if he can connect them with certain people.

I am a single parent. Is it possible for me to rear my child through the medium of Irish?

Yes. If you speak Irish all the time to the child and let him acquire English from his minder or from friends and relations there is no reason that he should not acquire both languages. If possible you should ask friends and relations to speak Irish to him so that he will realise that Irish is a natural means of communication. Comhluadar may be able to put you in contact with other single parents who have made Irish the language of the home.

My husband and I have just separated and our two children, both under the age of six are most of the time in my care. Will our separation affect their language development?

If Irish has been the language of the home you should try to keep it so. You may find it more difficult without your husband's support. Separation of parents can have a traumatic effect on children and the fewer changes made to their home life the better. Ask your husband also to speak in Irish to them when they are with him. If it is the case that you were accustomed to speak English to the children, and your husband Irish, try to encourage the children to use what Irish they have when speaking to each other. The question of which language the children should use should not be used by either parent to gain an advantage. Comhlúadar may be able to put you in contact with other parents who are in a similar situation.



My daughter refuses to speak Irish. When she's asked questions in Irish she answers in English. Even when I ask her in Irish to give a message to her brother she translates it into English before giving it. What should I do?

Even when it is the practice of everyone else in the family to speak Irish it happens sometimes that one member of the family insists on speaking English all the time or most of the time. According to a survey done for Comhlúadar the second born in Irish speaking families seem more inclined to speak in English than other children in the family. The fact that more children are being cared for by English speaking childminders may have some bearing on this but it also happens in families in which the mother or father are at home all the time, and speak only Irish to the children.

Sometimes the child's insistence on speaking English all the time does not last long and the parents manage to entice the child back to speaking Irish at least some of the time. But there are quite a few instances of children refusing to speak Irish for a long time.

Parents should deal sensitively with these children. It is difficult to determine exactly why some children speak English rather than Irish. There is absolutely no point in compelling them to speak Irish. That will only result in turning them against Irish. There must be a reason behind their insistence to speak English. It could be a subconscious reason and the children themselves may not understand why.

The parents of the girl mentioned above should consider the following points:

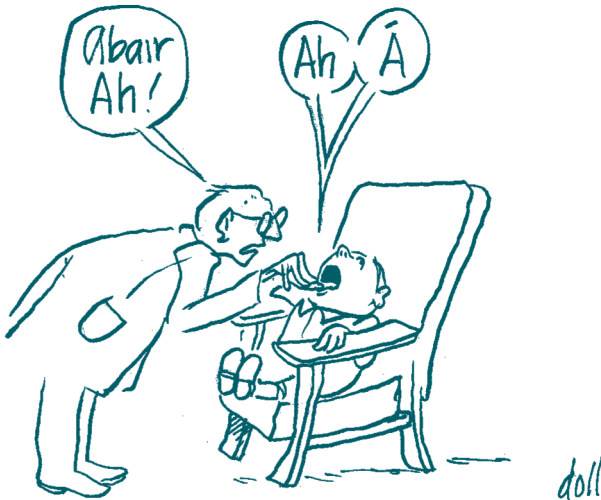
- Could the child be in the shadow of an older brother or sister and be trying to assert herself?
- Did they insist on correcting her Irish every time she made a mistake?
- Does the child associate Irish with criticism and work and English with fun? If that is the case they could try organising some special treat for that child alone as a way of enticing her to speak Irish.
- Does it upset her when you speak Irish to her in the presence of English speaking friends? If it does you could come to an arrangement with her whereby you agree to speak in English to her friends but in Irish to her when speaking to her personally.

It is easy for the child, who persists in answering her parents in English, to wear them down until they also revert to English. Try not to let this happen. Even if your conversation with this child is bilingual, that is you speaking Irish and she English, her ability to understand Irish will be improving all the time and she will have little difficulty in speaking Irish when she chooses to do so.

A negative attitude to speaking Irish is found quite often among teenagers and like a lot of the fashions that teenagers follow it usually only lasts a short time. Encourage and help them to attend functions where they will meet other young people who speak Irish. If their friends attend a Gaelscoil parents should make a habit of speaking Irish to those friends. Irish language colleges also help teenagers to grow accustomed to speaking to each other in Irish. But it is absolutely of no benefit to try to force them to speak Irish. You have planted the seed. It is up to the young people to decide whether or not they want to let it blossom.

Will a period in hospital interfere with the language development of my child?

If the child has to spend a long period in a hospital where none of the staff speaks Irish, English will most likely be his dominant language when he comes home, but this can change again. The parents or parent should explain to the sister in charge of the ward that the child's home language is Irish, and ask her if there is anyone on the staff who could speak Irish to him. It is important that the staff do not make a show of the child's knowledge of Irish. This could help some children's self confidence but it could also upset a sensitive child. Parents could ask friends and relations who visit the child in hospital to speak Irish to him. They could also leave tapes and books in Irish with him. There may be a nurse or visitor in the ward who might read it to him.



We have two children. Although they speak Irish to us, their parents, they prefer to converse with each other in English. What can we do to encourage them to speak Irish?

This is a very important question for eventually, through lack of usage, the children's proficiency in Irish will deteriorate. As well as that it will become increasingly more difficult to continue having Irish as the language of the home. Parents must be on their guard however not to create an aversion to Irish by forcing the children to speak it against their will.

Planning games and organising events that would encourage them to speak Irish would be far more beneficial. Young children especially will be more than content that their parent is willing to take part in a game with them. You could teach them a new game and if they get used to playing it in Irish there is a fair chance that they will continue to do so.

You should also try to increase the time that you spend with the children. Be on the look-out for interesting programmes in Irish on the television and watch them with the children. Ask them to teach you how to play their computer games. Try to get them to give you instructions in Irish. This may be difficult as they probably will have a lot of the terms in English. Help them, if you can, to acquire some of these terms in Irish. Go as a family to public events where Irish is spoken. Many of them are listed on Gaeltéacs on the television. Keep an eye on the Gaelscoil noticeboard for Irish events in your area.

Try also to direct the children's conversation back to Irish whenever possible. Don't be discouraged if they regularly switch from one language to another. It is inevitable that they will switch from Irish to English and from English to Irish unconsciously. Parents can influence this code switching by occasionally taking part in the conversation and directing it back to Irish.

Have a question of your own?

Comhluadar, the association for Irish speaking families, has been supporting parents since 1993. For more information, event up-dates, or to register with us, please contact:

COMHLUADAR

7 Lombard Street East, Dublin 2.

Tel: +353 1 671 5116 Fax: +353 1 671 0477

Mobile: +353 87 290 8391 / +353 87 230 3289

E-mail: eolas@comhluadar.ie Website: www.comhluadar.ie



Resources Suppliers

see page 41 in Irish version