



BY MALWINA GUDOWSKA

# TRY LINGUAL

If you speak a language besides English, should you teach it to your child from the womb on? For some Calgary families, the benefits of raising a child who can speak two, or even three, languages are worth the back and forth it takes to get there.

Matthew Singh jumps out of the car boiling over with excitement as he's about to enter a large play area with a multitude of new toys. As he walks into the aptly named Coffee and S'cream he jumps up and down, nearly bouncing off the walls with excitement. His one-year-old sister Milla stares at him with admiration. While his dad, Chad Singh, pays the \$5.71 per child entrance fee, Matthew proclaims: "Jachcem ice cream!" His mother, Christine Wielezynski Singh, looks down at her son and, in response to his half-Polish, half-English sentence, quickly quashes his demand for ice cream—*lody* in Polish—by answering him solely in her mother tongue. The translation: "Maybe later you can have ice cream at home." The child nods and we follow him and his sister into the play area. Matthew hops into one of the plastic kid cars and starts zooming around, much to the chagrin of one of the owners of the N.W. café who, moments later, asks him to slow down. Singh goes up to his son and in a calm manner tells him in Hindi that he has to watch out for the other kids. Matthew nods again and continues on his way.

At three and a half years old, Matthew is trilingual. The couple uses a popular language acquisition method called "one-parent-one-language," in which the mother always speaks one language with the child while the father always speaks another, whether it's English or, as in Matthew's case, a third language. Because Matthew spends the most time with Christine, who just finished a maternity leave with the couple's second child, his primary language is Polish. The rest of the time, Matthew communicates with Chad in Hindi and he's now also speaking English more regularly since starting preschool last fall. When the family is together, Matthew switches between Polish and Hindi, which Chad and Christine take turns translating into English for one another. It's a lengthy process, the couple admits, but it works. "Suppertime is interesting when all of us are sitting down and then there are three languages going," says Wielezynski Singh. "There are days when Matthew says all three languages in one sentence. He'll figure it out later on," says her husband. "We underestimate children," he adds. "It's not confusing for them at all, it was more of a challenge for us."

Singh, who hails from Fiji, moved with his family to Canada when he was 12 years old and spoke Hindi at home. His wife was born in Canada but grew up in a Polish-speaking home. Outside of conversa-

tions with their children and their respective parents, they both speak (and think) in English. Wielezynski Singh often finds herself at a loss for a Polish word, such as the other day when Matthew was playing with stamps and asked her what the word for ink was. In these cases, she has to look it up or call her parents. "Books have helped a lot," she says. "Whenever someone asks if they can bring us anything back from Poland, I always say books." She now knows every part of a truck in Polish—something she's not even familiar with in English.

The couple has also begun the one-parent-one-language technique with Milla, although this time Matthew has added his own twist to the challenge by deciding that his little sister only speaks English. "I try to explain to him that he needs to speak Polish with her, otherwise she won't understand," Wielezynski Singh says.

The list of benefits of learning a second language early on is long, and there are numerous studies and research that prove the positive effects. "There's evidence of more precocious reading skills, cognitive advantages, ability to shift more easily and more cognitive reasoning," says Suzanne Curtin, associate professor at the University of Calgary's Department of Linguistics. Studies have also shown that multilingual children tend to have better analytical, social, and academic skills than their monolingual peers. In addition to linguistic skills, according to experts, exposure to more than one language enhances mathematical skills and divergent thinking. Passing on one's mother tongue also naturally helps to pass on the family's heritage.

It's a remarkable opportunity for those parents raised in immigrant families or who became fluent on their own in another language. Any concerns they might have as to whether teaching their children a second language will confuse them, cause speech delays or impede their ability to compete with their peers academically are, according to linguists, misconceptions.

It's never easy, of course, especially if a parent's first language is no longer his or her dominant one, which is Maria Curtis's challenge. A native Swede, she came to Ottawa when she was 19 to participate in the Au-Pair program. Twenty-five years later, she's living in Calgary with her Canadian husband and three children. Curtis mastered English after moving to Ottawa and only a faint trace of an accent remains. Back in Europe, languages were an integral part of her studies and by Grade 12, in addition to English, she was studying German,

French and Latin.

Curtis and her husband were together for 10 years before marrying and another three before having their first daughter, now 12. By then, says Curtis, she had been in Canada so long, she no longer thought in Swedish. But she still wanted to teach her children her native tongue and spoke to her eldest in Swedish when she was first born. “It (turned out to be) a chore for me,” she says. “I had this tiny baby and I was in management and I worked long hours and when I came home and had to do this...it was hard work.” Curtis went back to work when her daughter was just six months old. At around one and a half, the daughter started to resist her in-house language lessons. “She didn’t like it when I spoke Swedish to her,” Curtis says. “That was the final nail in the coffin and I kind of gave up.”

Curtis tried again a few years later, putting her children (she’d also had a son by then) in Scandinavian preschool on Saturday mornings. “I liked it because it forced me to get back to the culture a bit and those things start to matter way more when you have kids.” But after a while, she felt like an outsider at the school because she and her kids didn’t speak the language at home and they stopped going. “I joke now that I got kicked out because I wasn’t Swedish enough,” she says. “I guess in the end, it just wasn’t important enough to me. It’s sad to say, but at that point I was just Canadian.”

I am trilingual and when the time comes, I will try my best to help my children learn Polish and French, in addition to English. I don’t have kids yet, so, no, I can’t relate to the feeling of being so tired you don’t have the energy to think, let alone speak to your child in a second language. But what I do know is the other side, being a child who was raised with the ingrained notion that travelling, discovering other cultures and learning new languages is of the utmost educational importance. The least I can do to thank my parents for their commitment and perseverance is to pass my mother tongue on to my child one day. My husband, a third-generation Pole, is monolingual but, as far as the future baby talk goes, he would also like our children to speak Polish and even wants to enroll them in other language immersion programs, such as French or Spanish.

I was raised in a 100-percent Polish-speaking home. Even though my father is an ESL instructor, if I tried speaking to my parents in English, they would ignore me for the most part (a valuable teaching tool, it turns out). We moved from Poland to Sweden for a year when I was four, and after attending preschool that year, I was able to communicate in Swedish. Then my family and I moved to Saskatoon, where I was sent to kindergarten in early November. My mother once told me that I came home from school on one of my first days, frustrated because I would speak Swedish to the children and they wouldn’t understand me. I then tried Polish and the same puzzling looks appeared on their little faces. But by Christmas, I was singing “Jingle Bells” and communicating just fine with my neighbourhood friend, Jana.

Confident in my English skills, my parents sent me to French immersion for Grade One. Sadly, by then I was no longer using my Swedish and it started to fade away. More than 25 years later, only two sentences remain in my Swedish vocabulary: “Hur mår du?” (“How are you?”) and “Vad heter du?” (“What’s your name?”). French Immersion

programs were popular in Saskatoon at the time, although anti-Trudeau sentiments soured some western Canadian families on the opportunity (one of my French Immersion elementary school classmates and friend to this day, tells me some of her parents’ friends didn’t look favourably on the decision to put her into the program). My family’s social circle wasn’t affected by the anti-French bias, probably because they were mostly Europeans, and I stayed in the French-immersion stream until the end of high school. Seeking to add a fourth language to my repertoire, I enrolled in Spanish in university but quickly realized my expedited language-learning abilities were long gone and I didn’t commit fully to the language.

I have an accent when I speak in Polish and some people tell me they hear a faint one when I speak in English. In French, I am often stumped for words because I rarely have the opportunity to use it. (Although, I did recently watch a French Juliette Binoche movie sans subtitles and got about 80 per cent of the plot, I think.) Although I can’t say I ever got a job specifically because I was trilingual (partially I think that has more to do with living in Alberta) I’ve always cherished the fact I speak three languages, especially when I travel. Besides the obvious perks of not getting ripped off by taxi drivers and business owners or falling into tourist traps, there’s a certain respect offered to travellers who know a country’s local language. Even if it’s the basic phrases, you feel like the locals hate you a little less.

When my husband and I travel, I try my best to pick up a few words here and there in the hope that I can at least fool the locals when ordering food (I realize I probably never do). A European trip some years ago took us to London, Paris and Krakow, where I was in my element, proudly (if somewhat incorrectly) switching from one language to another every couple of days. On a more recent trip to Italy and Croatia, things didn’t go as smoothly and I was a continual source of amusement for my husband. Frustrated that the woman at the gelato shop in Venice decided to repeat my order in English after I attempted it in Italian, he said: “You’re really out of sorts here not being able to speak the language, aren’t you?” with that tone that warrants a nudge, nudge, or light arm punch. He got an eye roll but he was right, that small innocent gesture made me feel defeated.

In Croatia I tried variations of Polish, as the Slavic languages are similar, but that didn’t go over well with locals who, I learned, are protective of their dialect. (German, it turns out, is much more welcomed since the country is inundated with Deutsch tourists all summer long.) There’s a comfort in having a language in your back pocket that’s there to pull out when the need arises, even if the occasions are far and few between. The chances of Croatian and Italian coming in handy are slim, but during that 15-second interaction with the gelato lady, knowing how to ask for two scoops of pistachio in proper Italian would have saved me the next 30 minutes and the rest of the trip from being perpetually irked that I couldn’t communicate in the language I wanted.

Which isn’t to say I always loved growing up as a Malwina in Canada. As a child, I used to wish my name was Patricia. It seemed simple, pretty enough and there was no chance of it being mispronounced. I remember the gut-wrenching feeling as I’d walk into a classroom only to see a substitute teacher standing at the desk, because that meant, she

or he would be doing roll call. As they'd approach the "G" surnames I would start to sweat, waiting for the inevitable. As the sub called out my name, pronouncing it as it is spelled in English but unfortunately, not as it sounds in Polish where the "w" makes a "v" sound, everyone would start to giggle. Against my father's wishes, I would sometimes write my name with a "v" instead of the "w" so people would pronounce it correctly. But that didn't last long. The guilt I felt at disgracing my Polish heritage always overcame me and I would change it back, adding that extra check mark to the "v" to make it into a "w".

Except for my very Polish name, it was never hard growing up with non-English speaking parents. But I also never appreciated their efforts until much later on in life. Outside the home, surrounded by mostly English speakers (all of the Polish immigrant kids spoke English to each other), it would have been much easier for my parents to give in and allow me to speak English to them, too. But they didn't, and beyond the obvious cultural reasons of keeping our heritage alive, my father says he knew I'd thank him one day. "I've met hundreds of people who say they wish their parents had taught them their native language, but I've never met anyone who's said they were sorry their parents had," he tells me.

Due to increased immigration since the mid-1980s, the share of the allophone population (those Canadians whose mother tongue is neither English nor French) has grown from 18 percent in 2001 to 20 percent in 2006, according to Statistics Canada. In 2005, 47 percent of Canadian citizens were of an ethnic origin other than British, French or native-born, according to the Department of Canadian Heritage. By 2031, one in four Canadians will be foreign-born. Canada's national identity has always been a melting pot of cultures, and the advantages of early bilingualism and multilingualism extend beyond the individual. "[There are] social advantages, access to more than one culture, tolerance of other cultures and linguistic advantages in the job market," says the U of C's Curtin. In 2006, almost 2.8 million Canadians reported using more than one language at work, according to Statistics Canada.

If a multilingual child wants to learn more languages in the future, it will be much easier for them, especially if they are related languages such as Spanish and French. According to studies of early multilingualism, children who are exposed to more than one language also feel more at ease in different environments and have a natural flexibility and adaptability. "By having this ability, this other language, there are more cascading effects that are more general, all the good things about being multicultural," says Curtin. "There's an awareness of other points of view."

Blythe Bohonos has noticed her daughter Chloe, who speaks Greek at home, shares a special connection with friends who also speak a second language at home. "There's just a feeling there," says Bohonos, who was raised in an English-speaking home. One of Chloe's closest friends is Lebanese and while I'm at her home interviewing the family Chloe, 11, gives me an impressive mini lesson on Arabic intonation.

Bohonos and her husband, Nick Diochnos are in a common situation where one parent grew up in a home speaking a foreign mother tongue but his partner did not. Diochnos was born in Greece

before immigrating with his parents to Montreal when he was five years old. Up until he was 11, he went to Greek school full time, where classes were half in English and half in Greek. He also learned French and remembers getting better marks than most of the other kids. "I was living in a bilingual, bicultural world back then," he says.

He moved to Calgary in 1978 and met Bohonos four years later. They've been together for 28 years and, in addition to Chloe, have a son, Kosta, 13. Both children are fluent in Greek and attend Greek school every Saturday morning.

Even though Bohonos is not fluent in Greek (she gets by now, she says, after taking some courses early on in their relationship), the couple wanted to pass on the language to the children. "When Kosta was born, I instinctually wanted to talk to him in Greek," Diochnos says. "That brought him closer to me." For Diochnos, more than the language, he also wanted to pass on his heritage. "My calculated aspect of it is that they are going to go outside and it will be English and the other culture will suffer," he says. "But how do I keep up (their Greek heritage) until at least they are grownups and it's really cemented in them?" Diochnos often play Greek music in the house and the family celebrates Greek traditions, often alongside his parents, who live in the city and are "very old-world Greek."

When the family is speaking Greek together, there are times when Bohonos has to stop everyone mid-conversation and ask that they translate for her. But when asked if she ever feels left out, she says the positive effects she sees now—such as her children's academic success in both Greek and regular school, their being able to connect with extended family in Greece (where they spent two months

## ALBERTA LANGUAGE INITIATIVE

In 2003, the Standing Policy Committee for Learning and Employment and the Government of Alberta approved the implementation of the Alberta Language Initiative. Beginning with the 2006/07 school year, second-language instruction would become a required component for students from Grade 4 all the way up to Grade 9, with one grade added each year. The plan was to have a fully implemented six-year compulsory language program in place by 2011/2012, but the initiative has been delayed because some jurisdictions were not ready. Although the program was never mandated legally at the provincial level, school boards already working on it have continued to pursue the initiative on their own, according to Elaine Schmidt, senior education specialist, French and international languages with the Calgary Board of Education. CBE students currently have access to a second language program that begins in Grade 4 and goes up to Grade 7, with Grade 8 launching this fall. In high school, second languages are optional, with choices available depending upon staffing and sustainability.

staying with relatives last summer), and having a base for future language learning—outweigh any feelings of isolation. The kids agree that it's cool to know a second language and sometimes use it to their advantage. "I can speak to people at my school and they don't have a clue of what I am saying," says Chloe. "And sometimes when solicitors (call), we will say stuff to them in Greek."

When it came to exposing the children to Diochnos's mother tongue, the couple started early. "I think you were singing Greek songs in the delivery room," Bohonos says to her husband. It turns out he was right on cue, if not a bit late, according to a new study out of the University of British Columbia. Published in the journal *Psychological Science*, the study shows newborns that were exposed to two languages while in the womb are able to discriminate between the languages just days after birth and will eventually recognize both languages as their mother tongue.

"Infants come equipped with powerful tools to learn language, whether that's one, two or even three languages," says Krista Byers-Heinlein, co-author of the study and a UBC graduate student in psychology. "There's always this fear that babies are going to get confused but we don't see any of that in our studies."

This should be encouraging for those parents who are afraid that their child will not be able to handle learning more than one language, a concern that sometimes is amplified if that child has a speech delay or is not on par with his or her peers. "It depends on what you mean by delay and what kind of delay and how it has been determined," says Curtin. "But bilingualism does not cause [speech] delays." There will naturally be differences between a bilingual and a monolingual child because a bilingual child is learning two languages instead of just one, Curtin says. But, by the time they arrive at school, the majority of children will reach the same stage of linguistic development as their monolingual peers. "While it might seem that their vocabulary is not on par with monolinguals, they are learning two labels for things in different languages," Curtin says. "All things being equal, the size of each vocabulary will be smaller the first few years but the global size may be larger."

But if you didn't have lengthy conversations in Spanish with your belly during your pregnancy, fret not, says Byers-Heinlein. The most positive thing parents should take away from the UBC study is that it demonstrates that children are predisposed to learning multiple languages from the womb on. In fact, the earlier children are exposed, the less likely they will have grammatical errors or an accent, and the more likely they'll sound like a native speaker of the language. Children learn from listening, says Byers-Heinlein, as well as from the

sheer number of words they hear. "If they have chatty mothers, they will have more advanced language development." And that applies to monolinguals, bilinguals and trilinguals.

If you want your child to learn a second, or third language, studies show that he or she must be exposed to it a minimum of 25 to 30 percent of his or her waking time. "There's no chance that a child in Calgary will not learn English, but that minority language needs a boost, extra time and extra attention," Byers-Heinlein says. Of course, even if you have great success with your child during their early years, things can get tough later on. Once children go to school, they'll realize that the heritage language is not being spoken by other kids. Wanting to fit in with their peers, they may rebel and close themselves off from what makes them different.

To offset the social pressure, Byers-Heinlein recommends creating positive experiences around the heritage language, using it while having fun or doing activities while reserving English as the language for discipline. You should expose the child to people who speak the heritage language, as well as movies, music and other cultural activities. If possible, parents should also plan family visits to the country where the language is spoken for a temporary boost.

Although early is ideal, it is never too late and there is a silver lining to all this or, maybe more of a copper-coloured one. The linguists and experts I spoke with all agree that there's no strict cut-off age for language learning. The older you get, the more challenging it is but as we know, people successfully learn new languages in adulthood. According to Byers-Heinlein, there are some areas of language acquisition where adults are even more efficient than children. Learning words, for example, is much more laborious for a child, but learning grammar is much harder for adults.

As I look down beside my computer, I see the University of Calgary Continuing Education catalogue buried under a pile of papers. I pull it out and remember earmarking the "Languages of the World" section a few months ago. I flip to it and there, "Spanish for Travelers I" is circled with a pink highlighter. The class starts at the end of April and I have yet to register. My husband and I are hoping to vacation in Spain this year and I want to be prepared to at least order in restaurants and communicate with shopkeepers, even if they do all reply in English. After only 10 weeks of instruction, the best-case scenario I can imagine would be knowing how to order a coffee, ask for a bathroom and maybe, if I'm lucky and work really hard at it, how to get somewhere without the taxi driver ripping us off. Knowing how difficult learning a language as an adult is and, how much time is required, I'll take it.

## WHAT IF THE FAMILY'S MOTHER TONGUE IS ENGLISH?

**Studies suggest that all children can benefit from learning a second language. Fortunately, Calgary leads the way with regard to choice.**

What can those of us whose mother tongue is English do to help our children gain the advantages of learning a new language? "Parents who don't have access to another language should not stress out," says UBC graduate student Krista Byers-Heinlein, the co-author of a new study on early language acquisition. Children, she says, are programmed to learn multiple languages well into the grade school years.

That's where public schools come in. "Alberta is leagues ahead," says Elaine Schmidt, senior education specialist, French and international languages with the Calgary Board of Education. "It's the only province that has an extensive bilingual program." The Calgary Board of Education, for example, has 7,000 students currently enrolled in the French Immersion program it has offered for over 35 years. Because French is an official language in Canada, the immersion program has indirect support from the Federal Government through the provincial vehicle. Bilingual programs, on the other hand, are considered community-based alternatives and it's up to each school district to come up with the resources to sustain them. "It's a very large commitment to make so that's why some schools jurisdictions can't offer bilingual programs," Schmidt says.

Edmonton was able to launch the first Ukrainian bilingual program, while Calgary's large Chinese community helped the CBE establish the first international bilingual program in Mandarin Chinese in 1998. (It's currently offered at King George Elementary and Langevin Junior High.) In 2001, the CBE was able to add a Spanish bilingual program and it's now the fastest-growing CBE language program (which include a German Bilingual Program, as well as a Cree/Blackfoot Language and Culture course). In addition to French Immersion and a Spanish bilingual program, the Calgary Catholic School District offers Language and Culture courses in Italian and Filipino.

Of course, deciding to enroll your child in a bilingual program is only the first step. Instead of French, Calgarians are now wondering if learning Spanish, the second most-spoken language in world, or Mandarin Chinese, the No. 1 language, would be more valuable in the future for their kids. The answer is just as personal as whether to teach your child your mother tongue. There are many factors besides whether the language connects with the family's heritage that come into play including the program availability and school proximity.

Parents who don't have another language under their belt might hesitate about putting their child in a bilingual or immersion program, concerned that they won't be able to help them with their studies at home or that the experience might prove too difficult. But, according to Schmidt, when children are young, it is actually less stressful for them to acquire new language skills. "They're sponges, they're risk takers and they make it fun and easy," she says. "Those parents who might have been concerned in the beginning are impressed two years later, They're asking their kids to say something in Spanish to the neighbours, proud of their success."