

# 30 Actionable Tips to Create Bilingual Environment

---

## Intro

---

Hi, I'm Olena. Welcome to [Bilingual Kids Rock](#) – a community for parents who are raising their kids to be bilingual.

I created this checklist to compile all the advice I would give a friend if she asked me how to raise her children speaking two languages.

I took a close look at our bilingual household: the technology we use, the places we go, the community we are in, and so forth, and from that I created this list of action steps with busy families in mind.

You won't find steps here like travelling abroad or learning another language yourself (which is not a bad thing to do, but requires a lot of time and resources).

There are things you can do literally in minutes to improve your child's exposure to his or her minority language (in other words – the second language he or she learns).

### **How to use this checklist**

This actionable checklist is divided into 4 parts:

1. Your Household
2. Outside Your Household
3. Technology
4. You

I recommend starting by going through the list and checking off all the things that you are already doing. That should give you a starting sense of accomplishment,

and an awareness of how much you've already done! Then you can go back and start implementing unchecked steps – one at a time.

Even if you only get one new idea from this list, it's already worth the time it took you to read it. Even one improvement translates into much better language environment for your bilingual child.

Important note: in this checklist I use the term “your heritage language.” It is true for me, because I’m passing my native language to my kids. But if your kids’ second language is not coming from you but from other sources (school, babysitter, and relatives) then just substitute “second language” for “heritage language” in the text. The advice is suitable for both situations.

The authors of “The Bilingual Edge” Kendall King and Alison Mackey stated in their book:

**You can't make your child speak a certain language. You can set the stage so that they want to speak it!**

Everything in this list is designed to give your children the happy setting they need to want to become bilingual!

## In Your Household

---

- Read books in your heritage language.** It can't be stressed too much – if you do nothing else, read books regularly with your child. Buy them online, bring a lot of them back when you travel to your heritage country, ask your relatives and friends give it to you as present, find them on Kindle, create them yourself – use everything possible to get your kids to read!
- Use a lot of written visual in your house:** hang the heritage language alphabet on the walls, write on a large wall calendar in your heritage language, cover chalk boards with messages or dinner menus, leave notes on the fridge; hang posters in your language.

- ❑ **Subscribe to magazines and newsletters** (physical) in your heritage language – for your child and yourself. You will be a good example for your child if they see you reading in your heritage language.
- ❑ **Put a big world map** on the wall and mark your heritage country, or places where the child's second language is spoken. It is a conversation starter. Every time you tell your children about your country, they will run to see where it happened and all of a sudden your heritage becomes more tangible – something that they can put their fingers on.
- ❑ **Cook your cultural food** and refer to dishes by the names used in your heritage country. We often joke in our family that my husband is part Ukrainian now (at least his stomach), because most of the food he eats is ethnic Ukrainian. The relationship between food and bilingualism looks like this: your child eats ethnic food – he/she likes it – he/she associates with the ethnic culture (it smells like home!) – he/she wants to speak the language, because it is part of his/her identity. Important note: try to give your child foods that he/she really likes, and don't push too hard on things that he/she doesn't like as much. If the associations are negative, you have the opposite of the desired effect!
- ❑ **Have your heritage regalia on the display:** flags, symbols, ethnic decorations etc. If you are very patriotic about your country, your child will treat his/her heritage as a very big deal as well, and being proud will definitely increase his/her desire to speak the language.
- ❑ **Celebrate your heritage holidays.** Yes, even if you end up with having two Christmases (like we do). It will create a lot of positive emotions associated with the language and culture in general, and can offer a concrete reason to speak the minority language: Grandpa Frost (the Russian version of Santa Claus) only brings presents to kids who speak Russian, and so forth.
- ❑ **Keep reading to your kids**, even if they have started to read in their second language on their own. They will hear the correct way the words are spelled and the sentences are built. Also, it is a great way to introduce new vocabulary.

# Outside the House

---

- ❑ **Join a playgroup.** If you live in the bigger city, try this website: [www.meetup.com](http://www.meetup.com). All sorts of language and ethnicity groups are available there for you to join. But if you are from small town (ours is only 1141 people), you can still use old-fashioned ways to meet with others of your heritage. Check schools, local colleges, family centers, churches, local festivals, ethnic stores, libraries and everything you can possibly think. I met one of my good friends from Russia just by seeing her name on her business's big board. She gave me phone numbers of people she knows of our descent and from that it was just like snowballing – now I know plenty of other Russian-speaking families, and I've met great friends and playmates for my kids.
- ❑ **Tell people** whom your child respects (doctor, teachers, coaches etc) about you bilingual plans and explain why it is so important to you and your family. Excitement is very contagious: if you are raving about your child's bilingualism, they will rave too.
- ❑ **Check your local library** for books or activities in your heritage language.
- ❑ **Find a church** associated with your heritage ethnicity in your area – you may not be very religious, but it is good way to meet people of you heritage.
- ❑ **Find a person that your child speaks with in monolingual mode only** and encourage them to interact on a regular basis (once week for example). What is monolingual mode? It is when your child is forced by circumstances to use only one language exclusively without mixing two languages together. This person could be anyone who does not speak the majority language: grandparents, cousins, a hired teacher, newly moved kids who does not speak majority language yet, or an online buddy for older children (check [www.polyglotclub.com](http://www.polyglotclub.com) to find such buddy for your child).
- ❑ **Find a good summer program or language camp.** Even if your child is still too small for sleepover camps, it is not too early to plan for it.

- Tell your pediatrician, teachers, coaches and other important adults who surround your child about his/her bilingualism. Why? Because these people are authorities for your child and if they compliment his or her ability to speak two languages, your child will be pleased and encouraged to continue to do so.

## Technology

---

- Use smart phone and tablet apps.** Our kids are a digital generation: they are attracted to technology like magnets. Use it to you advantage! Always be on the look for great apps in your language. iTunes, for example has stores in many countries. I've found a number of Russian-language apps that my kids love to use by simply Google searching "great iPhone apps for kids" in Russian, and then buying some of the apps I find on iTunes.
- Find an internet radio station in the heritage language.** It is just nice to have music on the background, especially in you heritage language, and soon your children will be singing along to familiar tunes. I use both children's radio stations and regular adult ones as well.
- Find an educational TV station** (satellite or online TV). If you have TV at you house, find a good channel in you heritage language and subscribe to it. If you don't have TV (like our family), then online TV is a good option.
- Install Skype** – this is the next best thing (after face to face) to stay in touch with your family. It's also a good way to find and stay in touch with language tutors for your children. There are many schools now that teach languages via Skype. My son, for example, is taking Spanish class online and he has a lot of personal attention from his Skype teacher.
- Make notes of your child's language development.** Once a month, I write down interesting ideas and sentences my children have said. After a while, I have a nice picture of their language progression or regression. I use evernote.com for capturing it. I have it on my phone, so it is easy to do any minute.
- Supplement regular books with Kindle ebooks** – look for books in your language, and then download them onto a Kindle or tablet.

- ❑ **Change the language of your phone** (or of you child's phone, if he/she has one). It only takes a couple minutes, and from then on requires them to use their heritage language to access menus, apps, etc.
- ❑ **Subscribe to a podcast appropriate to your child's age.** Don't think podcasts are only for grownups. Even young children can listen to their favorite stories via podcast. Again, I use iTunes.
- ❑ **Leverage YouTube videos.** YouTube can be an amazing source of information. Recently we watched a video of two Ukrainian 6 year old gymnasts, who is incredibly talented. My daughter told everyone about them and also how much she loves Ukraine. Be careful, however, as it is possible for kids to wander out on YouTube and find content that is not age-appropriate. Use playlists created by other parents or create one yourself – this way you know what they are watching.

## You

---

- ❑ **Schedule daily quality time with your kids.** Literally, put it in your calendar. Something like: Playtime after dinner. Do whatever your child would like to do with you: play dolls or train, dance, sing, draw, fishing, play in the park; board games. The main point is that you don't do anything else except paying full attention to your child: no phone calls, no housework, no Facebook, etc.
- ❑ **Learn 5 songs in your heritage language.** Print out lyrics or find a recording to sing along with at first. Soon, you will learn the words and won't need to look them up. Sing them on the road, sing them when cooking, sing them when putting kids to bed...and whenever you feel like singing. Kids are good listeners; they will pick the tune.
- ❑ **Get into the habit of not mixing languages,** especially if you live in the predominantly monolingual environment. If you mix languages when talking to your child, he wouldn't even try to explain everything in the minority language. Remember, kids are like water: they flow down the pass of the least resistance. You have to only be accessible in the language you're trying to teach them if you want them to use it.

- ❑ **Schedule “Family Night”.** This one is little bit different from the daily quality time, because we make sure we get out of the house and go explore new places in our area. The excitement associated with new places boosts the conversations with your children and brings new vocabulary. Of course make sure you speak your heritage language.
- ❑ **Put kids to bed – be involved in their night routine.** The biggest secrets are revealed by your kids when you talk under the dim light. Creating a good bond will positively reflect on their language development.
- ❑ **Talk more to kids.** Ask questions, tell stories, and explain how things work. Language learning is an interaction. So don’t be silent. Kids need to hear the language.
- ❑ **Be positive.** Don’t make language a battleground or a chore. Positive emotion towards language is must! You want to raise a HAPPY bilingual child!

Hopefully, this checklist was helpful for you.

Sincerely,

Olena.

Olena Centeno

Founder, [www.BilingualKidsRock.com](http://www.BilingualKidsRock.com)

[Olena@bilingualkidsrock.com](mailto:Olena@bilingualkidsrock.com)

Connect – [LinkedIn](#) – [Facebook](#) – [Twitter](#)