

# Parent and bilingual children at the time of Covid-19 pandemic

**By Sigríður Ólafsdóttir, Assistant Professor at the School of Education**

Now are unusual times. Preschools and elementary schools offer children to stay in the school either a part of the day or a few days a week. Then children are more at home. It is best that the children stay with their parents, rather than grandpa and granny. Older people are in much bigger danger than young people to become seriously ill if they get the virus.

**How can parents and children spend the day in the best way so that the time together is both enjoyable and instructive?**

It is important to have decided about the organization of the day. It both shortens the day and children will become more secure because they know to some extent how the day will be.

Children who use different languages at home and in the preschool or compulsory school need to get more opportunities to use Icelandic at home at this time because they spend less time at school. If Icelandic is used less while the situation lasts, there is a danger that the children's Icelandic skills increase slower. It could lead to worse results in school work. Even if parents and children continue to use their mother tongue in their communication, there are numerous opportunities on how to include Icelandic.

If parents know little or no Icelandic, children can teach their parents or they can learn together.

The day naturally divides according to meals. There is a perfect opportunity that children take part in the

preparation, decisions on what to eat and how to cook. Then valuable discussions between parents and children can take place. It is important to name the food, kitchen utensils and actions, and parents and children can practice saying everything both in the mother tongue and in Icelandic. If Icelandic words are missing, someone can get the role to find words online, for example just on google translate.

It depends to a great extent on the age of the child what suits best.

### **Preschool children**

After each meal, it is important to continue using words that came up during the cooking. A good idea is to use them during play, in imitating the cooking with toys. Then it is possible to draw and do handcrafts. Above all, it is important to talk together during the play, use Icelandic words and the mother tongue.

Young children learn indeed best through play and communication that takes place often during the day. The discussions with the child need to revolve around topics that the child shows interest in. The adult has to come to the child and discuss what the child is doing. That gives the best results. And then new opportunities appear to name things and actions in Icelandic.

Children learn best and most through discussions. That is also relevant when books are read. It is wonderful to read books in the mother tongue and also in Icelandic. The adult reads and the child listens and then they talk together about the reading, and that is the best. Often the child continues to read by herself and she uses the pictures for support. It is very useful and the adult takes part by continuing the dialogue and later the reading. When books are read in Icelandic, it is possible to discuss them both in the mother tongue and in Icelandic, and vice versa, when books are read

in the mother tongue, it is possible to include Icelandic.

Daily play indoors and outdoors, handicrafts with all sorts of material from here and there, walks in nature, all of these are the source of discussions that increase the language development of children. It is important to include Icelandic words here and there, in addition to the mother tongue, and to use the opportunities that come up to develop Icelandic skills.

### **Compulsory school children**

Older children can have strong opinions about what is cooked every day. It can be fun to look at online recipes, in Icelandic and in the mother tongue. There is a rich vocabulary that includes food, kitchen utensils and cooking methods. It is important to continue to use the new words so that they stick in the memory. Discussions with adults about what should be for lunch and dinner, discussions during the cooking, and during the meals contribute a great deal to the language development of children. Children can even have fun making a cookbook written in Icelandic and the mother tongue.

Discussions will also be content-rich when they link to reading books, in the mother tongue and in Icelandic. It is important that the child reads books in both languages because reading is the best way to increase skills in languages. You find different kinds of words in the books that you never or rarely use when you talk together. Such words play an important role in the study because they also appear when students read and discuss the material in various school subjects. Children who have learned to read can read books of their own choice and it is important to tell the parents about the books and discuss them together. Then even more learning takes place. Then it is also enjoyable to read books together, spend time together with a book, read and talk.

Children of compulsory school age may also have to make up for

the little time that they spend in the school. Teachers give them homework. The most effective way is when children don't work on the projects by themselves, but the parents get good information about what children are doing and they assist as needed. That way even a richer source of discussions appears. It is possible to discuss the subject and to connect it with children's experience or interests.

Parents though know their children best. Some children are just satisfied working on their projects, but others are not. It is important not to create too much tension in the household. That's why it is important to notice all the opportunities in the daily family life that can be the origin of a lot of learning. If children receive sufficient opportunities for enjoyable communication with their parents in combination with free play, they will feel well and so will their families. Then it is more probable that children have the peace of mind and energy to tackle the school subjects.

### **Discussions about COVID-19**

Children also need to discuss the current situation with their parents but it depends on the age of the child how it is best to approach this. Now all news is packed with discussions about COVID-19 and there are daily information meetings with our key people here in the country. It is good that families watch together with older children and get information on how things develop and how authorities react. For bilingual families, it is a golden opportunity to follow with the development in Iceland and also in the country of origin and to compare how the countries solve matters. Then it is necessary to discuss the matters within the family. The discussions are very useful. Without doubt, many words come up, both in Icelandic and in the mother tongue, that are new for the child and even for the parents, and it is necessary to pick those words, look at their meaning, find how they are used for example on the internet. Then it is necessary to use these words in the discussions.

Translation to English: Renata Emilsson Pesková.