



# Bilingual Options

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### *"Should I pretend not to understand?"*

The initial promoters of infant bilingualism suggested that parents should create a quasi-monolingual environment and simply pretend not to understand when the child spoke to them in the "wrong" language. More recently people have said that this is not actually fair. I side with the latter position. Your young child is trying her hardest to communicate with you. It would indeed be unfair not to appreciate this. Here are some alternative strategies:

1. Repeat what your child has said to you in your language. However, don't make it a lesson. Make it sound like positive feedback, then extend the topic so that she hears the word or word combination a few more times: "sí, es un gato. ¿Qué hace el gato? El gato se esconde." [yes, it's a cat. What is the cat doing? The cat is hiding]
2. If that's not enough to swing your child back to using your language, you could draw his attention to the issue of language choice more forcefully: "ja, Mama sagt *cat*, aber ich sag *Katze*." [yes, mum says *cat*, but I say *Katze*.] Please note that this starts with an affirmation of what your child has just said, not a correction.
3. If you also ask your child to repeat the word in question, there is a much better chance that he will use it spontaneously next time: "Kannst du *Katze* sagen?" [can you say *cat*?] If he does, great! But still extend the topic in a way that gives both of you the chance to use the word a few more times.
4. If she does not or outwardly refuses to say the missing word in your language, assume that it is too hard and continue with step 2.
5. For the older and/or more capable child you may achieve a switch back to your language by saying: "that's a daddy word. What does Mummy say." You say that in your language of course. Btw, grandparents or babysitters can use the same strategy referring to the child's mum or dad.

Usually these strategies work quite well from around 2 years of age when a child is learning about possessions. By 3 years of age, most children are able to talk about languages as English, or German or Spanish or whatever it is you are speaking at home.

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