

**Guide to  
Language Development  
in Children from  
Mixed Language Environments**



### 2017 Re-publication

The 2017 edition of this guide is an initiative of Les EssentiElles, within the scope of:

*I speak English et j'♥ le français.*

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A **“mixed couple”** is made up of two people from different cultures, speaking different languages.

So, in this context, the **“allophone”** parent is the person from a non-francophone culture.

The goal of this guide is to help parents have fun with their children during their language development. It offers general tips and ideas to facilitate communication and interest children in the world around them. Some children may wish to do activities designed for older children or go back to a game that they enjoyed when they were younger. Parents are free to adapt this guide to their children's level. Also, children may be curious about the written information. A short, simple explanation is always best. Regardless of whether the parents are a couple and whether there are other adults or children in the family, the activities can be done with two people or more, as you wish.









# Summary

5	Birth to 6 months
8	6 to 12 months
11	1 to 2 years
13	2 years
15	3 years
17	4 years
19	5 years
21	6 years
23	7 years
25	Some practical advice
28	Resources
29	For families living in the Yukon
30	Sources of inspiration

## Approximate age: birth to 6 months

### What are babies able to do?



They are sensitive to touch, sounds and the inflections of the voice.

They try to identify where sounds are coming from by moving their heads and, later, by directing their bodies towards the sounds.

They babble, try to make sounds, explore and recognize their own voices.

They react to intonation and expressions such as "It's good!" and the word "no".



### How can we help them in their development?

Talk to your child as much as possible, softly, warmly and close to their face (their vision develops gradually).

Describe what you are doing.

Sing all kinds of songs when you go for walks, during their bath and at meal times.

Name objects and sounds around them in a calm, playful way.

Encourage them to produce sounds by imitating the sounds they make.

Play any kind of soft music and nursery rhymes to them, right from birth. Touch them, exercise their arms, feet and legs while talking softly.

## Sing and laugh with them

Expose them to a variety of sounds using objects like a rattle, a piece of paper, a bottle of water. Make sounds on either side of their head, in front of them and behind them. This is a good way to determine whether they are hearing well.

Also think about providing periods of silence, with no television or radio, so that they can identify background noises and common ambient sounds such as water flowing, the coffee percolator, a door opening, the toilet flushing, the footsteps of mom, dad and other family members.

An interesting field of study theorizes that when babies cry, they communicate their needs. Try to identify these typical sounds:

« a-ou-w » = fatigue

« hhè » = change-moi

« nè » = faim

« èhh » = rot « i-a-eu-gr » = douleur



Because we speak more than one language in the family

Do the proposed activities in your own language so your child may learn to recognize its typical sounds. Other adult caregivers should also communicate in their own language. Apply the « one parent, one language » approach, but with some measure of flexibility.

If you have uncertainties or questions about your child's development, please see the handy tips at the end of this document.





## Approximate age: 6 to 12 months

### What are babies able to do?



They turn to look at you when you say their names.

They understand when you approve or disapprove.

They pay more attention when you speak to them.

They make sounds and movements with their mouths.

They distinguish and imitate the sounds of the language or languages you speak.

They start to imitate very simple words such as: "dodo, dada, mama" and later, try to identify people and animals close to them.

They start to give meaning to their actions. They will say "want" for "I want that" while stretching out their arms toward the object they want.

Learn and teach a few signs so that children can express themselves. At this age, language has not yet been acquired.

Though several sign languages exist, the best known is the American Sign Language or ASL whose signs are very simple and easy to understand. Lifeprint [www.lifeprint.com](http://www.lifeprint.com) offers professional expertise with short videos and clear, simple illustrations of the sign for each word. They allow you to master the desired signs and teach them to your child. The site is in English only. However, the universality of the signs is ideal for children's motor and comprehension skills at this stage.

A section is especially dedicated to the first 100 signs. We recommend the following signs to start: you make the sign as you speak normally, focusing on the immediate need:

Je t'aime: I love you

Soif: thirsty

Faim: hungry

Dodo: sleep

Assez: enough

Encore: more

Se laver: wash

Chaud: hot

Froid: cold

Bon: good

Jouer: play

Aide-moi: help me



## How can we help them in their development?

Use the voice as a tool for play: using different inflections to tell stories or describe what is going on around them.

Make noises with your mouth, make faces, smile and laugh together. Name and describe the things around them by showing them the object and the image. Also name what they show you.

Make sure you have their attention.

Use plenty of repetition.

Take advantage of their interest in an object to talk to them about it.

Provide them with books made of strong, durable materials such as cloth or cardboard.

Repeat what children say with the same syllables, sounds and intonations to encourage them to interact and imitate.

Respond to their babbles to encourage them, as if you are having a conversation with them.

Ask them questions and give them answers, such as: "Do you want a banana? Yes? Well, mama will give you a banana. (Baby's name) is going to eat a banana."

Explain to them what you are doing all through your day, for example: "I'm cooking the carrots. I'm washing the dishes, etc."

Explain to them the stages in the day. For example: "We're going to eat and then you're going to take a nap in your bed."





Identify, imitate and even touch, when possible, a picture, an object or a living being. For example:

"Oh! It's a cow. It says moo!"

"Oh! A car. It goes vroom!"

Congratulate and encourage them in their own attempts to imitate sounds.

*Because we speak more than one language in the family*

Have fun naming objects near your child in your own language.



If you have uncertainties or questions about your child's development, please see the handy tips at the end of this document.

## Approximate age: 1 to 2 years

### What are your children able to do?



They understand and start to speak in simple 2-3 word sentences.

They have difficulty pronouncing words, saying "old" for "cold" or the words might not be in the right order.

They recognize the people and things around them.

They try to communicate with other people through language and gestures. For example: they grab the parent's hand to show them something, give them an object to play with.

They understand simple commands such as "Sit down when you are eating please", "Shut the drawer please".

**Reinforce their efforts to produce sounds.**

*If they are making "a" sounds, continue the sound and produce words such as "apple", "alligator".*



## How can we help them in their development?

Talk to them normally and correctly, using plain language.

Keep playing the games from previous stages, adding additional information such as: "The duck. The duck goes quack, quack! The duck swims in the water".

Provide books made of strong, durable materials such as cloth or cardboard, and old magazines with coloured photos and illustrations such as toy catalogues that children can handle with no risk of damage.

Teach them to speak with words and signs instead of screaming or crying.

Invite them to use ALS signs to accompany what they are saying. In this way, they learn that with words and signs, they can obtain a response to their requests more quickly and with no stress (first step toward autonomy).

Name and find parts of their bodies. Touch them, show them the parts on pictures of animals and stuffed animals. Ask them to show the body parts you are naming.

Make a game of naming objects in your language. Continue to talk to them about the things around them.

Teach them to ask for things, to greet people and say thank you.

Introduce them to the people they meet by their first names. Introduce them to good manners.

## *Because we speak more than one language in the family*

Have fun naming objects in your own language. Continue to speak of things surrounding the child. At this age, one can easily highlight the importance of the different languages in the household by speaking them among adults, and speaking to the child as well with simple terms.

For example, a grandparent who speaks a third language may address the child and encourage conversations in that language, one expression at a time. His language skills may evolve more slowly than other children who speak only one language. The child is simply working out mental references to the languages heard around him, for example: « cat, chat, gatto » – respect the child's rhythm of learning, and let the words sink in and speech develop.







## Approximate age: 2 years

### What are your children able to do?

They can say their name and the names of friends or significant people.

They express themselves more clearly with simple 2-3 word sentences.

They repeat the same non-words, for example:

"ou-ide" = "outside"

### How can we help them in their development?

Engage them in conversation. Give them time to speak.

It's normal for children to stutter a bit.

Explain the words they don't understand.

Mime, point, use ASL signs to make yourself understood, the same way they do when they talk to you.

Take the time to pick them up or kneel at their level so that they can show you what they want and help them repeat what they are saying correctly. Eye contact during conversations is very important.

Sing little songs and nursery rhymes to them.

Encourage them to follow the pictures as you read a storybook to them, to develop their attention span.

Children learn by imitating and you are their best role model!

Television is a useful tool when parents and children can enjoy it together. At this age, children don't understand the difference between right and wrong yet, so it is important to be present to filter what they are watching.

### Play riddle games:

"What is red? A tomato?  
What do you see? Is it a tomato?  
Yes! A nice red tomato!"

Repeat the correct form of mispronounced words without forcing the child to do the same.

If the child is still using a bottle or pacifier, gently encourage them to let it go to help improve speech. Bottles and pacifiers "occupy" the mouth and slow down the production of sounds.



### *Because we speak more than one language in the family*

Repeat words and explain their meaning in your own language. Repeat them in French, if known. This reinforces the impression that it is natural to speak any of the languages spoken in the family.

You can also ask him the translation for a word.

Foster conversation with your child.

If you have uncertainties or questions about your child's development, please see the handy tips at the end of this document.

## Approximate age: 3 years

What are your  
children able to do?

They understand stories.

They ask questions.

They can have a simple conversation.



How can we help them in their development?

Ask them to tell a story about a particular subject.

Take one or two pictures and tell a story based on them. Ask the child to do the same, but don't expect the story to be coherent. It is the first step in an imaginative exercise.

Help them to properly say what they are thinking and feeling.





Teach them: "my, your, mine, yours, his, her".

Show them the importance of sharing when playing with others.

Make rhymes with names of significant people or objects. For example: "Joe can throw" / "The bear's on the chair".

Listen to them.

Give them time to speak.

Continue to speak to them and name objects.



*Because we speak more than one language in the family*

Continue to speak to your child in your own language during activities. Control and insist on the appropriate choice of language, depending on who is addressing the child or to whom he is speaking.

His comprehension level gets better and better.

At this stage, it is important to give equal importance to languages spoken in the household. This also applies to parents who are separated. The child is able to observe the frequency of each language in his or her surroundings, so it is important to offer as many opportunities to socialize in French, in playgroups or library activities, for example.

If you have uncertainties or questions about your child's development, please see the handy tips at the end of this document.



## Approximate age: 4 years

### What are your children able to do?



They more easily create longer sentences, but may still make mistakes.

They say "I, you, he, mine, yours, his".

They recognize similarities between words that start with the same letter or those that rhyme.

They imagine and tell stories, play roles and put on a show, and can even transform a stick into a character in a story.

They ask lots of questions.

They like to initiate and maintain conversations.



### How can we help them in their development?

Teach them: "Theirs, ours, mine, yours".

Ask them to make up a story and tell it to you or tell a familiar story their own way. Read and tell them the stories they like over and over again.

Go on an imaginary trip together and create a story from drawings, cuttings and collages.

Ask them to describe a picture, a photo or one of their drawings.

Create a reading corner with a chair, books and an activity table with pencils and paper where they can sit and write.

Read food labels and recipes out loud.

Give them the opportunity to read after you.

*Answer their questions briefly, simply and specifically, and keep the conversation going by asking questions.*

*Use the correct words. For example, say "stuffed animal" rather than "stuffie".*

*Give them the opportunity to show initiative – for example, helping to bake cookies, setting the table, sorting laundry, stacking wood – and start a conversation about what they have accomplished. As you listen, you can see whether they make logical sequences when describing what they are doing and give them hints, such as "Before we put the cookie dough on the sheet, we need to grease it".*

*Speak to them about more advanced concepts such as dimensions, differences and similarities, using more complex expressions of location, for example: "**In, on, beside, over, under, around, inside, outside,** etc."*



*Because we speak more than one language in the family*

*Play at repeating words in French. Play role reversal games where the child is your teacher. Conversations may be in your own language, clarifying which language a word belongs to when there is confusion. Ask your child about the highlights of his day, and have a conversation on these events.*

*If the child seems to be using one language less than another, both parents can stimulate a response in the appropriate language by telling a well-known story but filling it with errors: for example, tell the story of « Little Blue Riding Hood » in order to raise a response*

*Children love to play make-believe. Play different characters. Add gestures when you tell their favorite stories. Television might be an useful learning tool that can help children discover the outside world. It's an activity to do together to keep filtering what they see.*

## Approximate age: 5 to 6 years

### What are your children able to do?

They can link at least four pictures together to tell a story.

They make up stories and tell them in a relatively clear logical sequence.

They can maintain a conversation and ask more complex questions with “why” and “who”.

They can provide details.

They may sometimes confuse some sounds, for example: “w” and “r” (cawot for carrot).

They can use future tense.

They can follow school-related instructions.

They can express themselves in 4 to 7-word sentences.

They can also express themselves with equal ease in their other languages.

If you have uncertainties or questions about your child's development, please see the handy tips at the end of this document.





## How can we help them in their development?



Create, draw or paste story and cartoon sequences.

Encourage them to express their opinions and feelings.

Listen to what they have to say without interrupting.

To help master the letter "r", play gargles or play trucks and make the sound "rrr" by imitating the roaring of motors.

Play "When I grow up, I will..."

Does your child like to play board games? Play them in French!

Invite them to plan events, such as a museum visit, a pool activity or hiking. Talk to them about the preparations and what they could do to participate in the organization.

Make up stories together using their toys and ask them to predict what is going to happen next.

Introduce more complex words such as "before, after", "rough, smooth", "easy, hard".

Talk to them about numbers and quantities to help them distinguish between the expressions a lot and a little; more and no more; less and at least; one and some; several and many.

If they stick possessive forms together, such as "my mine", model the correct expression for them without forcing them to repeat after you.

Carefully monitor video game, Internet and television time. Although children develop better dexterity and greater visual acuity for details if they play with video controls such as joysticks and Wii, it is important to be present and to play together to teach them the etiquette of competitive games and appropriate behaviour.

Watch DVDs in French with subtitles in the language of the allophone parent to include them in the activity.

### *Because we speak more than one language in the family*

Activities are best conducted in the language of the parent involved with the child – it is also possible to encourage the use of French when both parents are involved in the activity.



## Approximate age: 6 years

### What are your children able to do ?



They remember instructions.

They tell the day's events in chronological order.

They understand the main idea of a story and anticipate what comes next.

They define expressions in their own words.

They acquire a more and more advanced vocabulary in preparation for reading.

They express themselves at a level similar to that of an adult.

They learn to modify their speech to fit the context.

They understand well and can interpret or explain what was said.

They express themselves quite clearly in the languages they have learned.



### How can we help them in their development?

Take the time to speak with them.

Look at the pictures in a book and predict what is going to happen.

Ask "What is this?", "What is it for?", and give children a turn to ask you a question.

Expose them to rewarding situations that will increase their vocabulary, such as cultural activities.

If children have more difficulties in one of the languages, encourage them to read more in that language.

Limit your instructions to 3 commands at a time, for example: "In three minutes, we will put the toys away, you will put on your pyjamas and brush your teeth".

Play descriptive games: "I see something that is blue and red...", "I see a ball that is white. It has a rubbery texture and smells like new plastic..."

Play role games: scientists, cooks, etc.

Tell stories by giving the first sentence and, taking turns, adding to the story.

Strictly control time spent in front of the computer and the television.

Ensure that computer content and games are of a kind that will improve manual motor and visual reflexes and preferably of an educational nature. Verbal communication is not necessarily enriched by this kind of activity, unless you take the time to talk about it.

Language is important in children, but the need to feel listened to is even more important.



*Because we speak more than one language in the family*

Play time is conducted in the language of the parent – it is also possible to encourage the use of French when both parents are involved in the activity.

Listen to stories on CD in any language; listen to a few minutes of a film sequence on DVD using the sub-titling function to accommodate your needs whenever possible. Explore the subject through questions, conversations, and word-games to enrich vocabulary.

Listen to music. Explain new words, and the meaning of certain passages.

Use musical instruments to play with words, sounds, and rhythms.

If you have uncertainties or questions about your child's development, please see the handy tips at the end of this document.

## Approximate age: 7 years

### What are your children able to do?



They read fluently.

They can explain what they have read.

They master more and more of the complexities of French.

They express themselves with more and more ease in other languages, as long as they speak them regularly.





### How can we help them in their development?

Continue to read with your child even if they are able to read on their own.

Ask them questions about what they have read.

Give children an opportunity to express themselves and tell their story on occasions when this is appropriate. You will be touched by what they have to say.



*Because we speak more than one language in the family*

At this stage, parents speak in the language that needs reinforcement during combined activities. One-on-one activities take place in the respective parent's mother-tongue. Reading takes on a different twist where the child reads to the parent in French, and then translates the story in his own words.

## Some practical advice

Don't try to compare babies to each other. Children progress through the stages of development at their own pace on different levels and based on their preferences. Some will learn to walk first and then talk, and others will communicate more through gestures and words and then take their first steps.

Also, the language skills of children in an exogamous environment seem to develop more slowly. In fact, the rate of language acquisition is the same, but because they assimilate more than one language at a time, what takes time is mastering the different language structures.

It is also normal for children to mix words from the languages they have learnt, as it is also possible for them to start speaking later than unilingual children. So, don't be too worried if this is the case. As long as they have a model for correct speech, they will learn all the languages they hear regularly and will know how to distinguish them!

Children develop at their own pace, differently from their brothers and sisters, their parents, and other children in their environment.



## **Children may experience temporary difficulties that tend to resolve themselves with time.**

### **However, if your child:**

Does not laugh, does not play with their sound, or make vocal voluntary noises

Does not react to the sounds and noises around them

Does not make eye contact

Is withdrawn, seems anxious, shows no interest in communicating through sounds or gestures

Does not develop motor skills

Does not express feelings of happiness or sadness

### ***Between 3 and 4 years of age, if your child:***

Does not make 3-word sentences

Does not properly enunciate, so that you don't really understand what they are saying, then they may benefit from sessions with a speech-language pathologist

Does not properly understand simple instructions or stories

Speaks with a strange, hoarse voice (beyond two weeks after a cold)

Do not hesitate to consult with your family doctor or your local family service centre.

*If your child shows symptoms such as these or their communication suddenly deteriorates, do not hesitate to consult with your family doctor or your local family service centre.*

## Game ideas

### SINGING SHOW

You can start this game as soon as children understand and want to sing. Depending on their age, children like parents to sing with them or want to sing solo so that parents can listen and applaud. Older children can learn to sing rounds: start by singing them in unison and then gradually practise them as rounds: Row, Row, Row your Boat; Three Blind Mice; and Frère Jacques.

For more ideas, see the card game available on line  
or at the AFY.



### TACTILE LETTERS

Cut out letter shapes. Help children apply glue and cover the shape with various materials like popcorn, rice, pasta, leaves, bark, paper, etc. Let dry. So that they recognize each letter, choose various materials that they can touch and trace with their fingers.

### NOISES

Identify an object, picture or living being and imitate it while touching it, when possible. Form the words again in front of your child so that they see your mouth. Encourage them to imitate you and take every opportunity to congratulate them on their efforts.

### ELEMENTARY, MY DEAR!

With this deduction game, you each take a turn. Ask children to put an everyday toy or object in a grocery bag without showing you. Ask them questions to deduce what is hidden in the bag. Make them laugh by asking silly questions such as "Is there a bicycle in your bag?"



## Resources

### Online:

L'Encyclopédie sur le développement des jeunes enfants :  
[www.enfant-encyclopedie.com](http://www.enfant-encyclopedie.com)

Centre d'excellence pour le développement des jeunes enfants :  
[www.excellence-jeunesenfants.ca](http://www.excellence-jeunesenfants.ca)

Le cybermagazine de la famille et de la petite enfance, The family and early childhood magazine, with plenty of educational activities and resources:  
[www.educatout.com](http://www.educatout.com)

CHU Sainte-Justine :  
[www.chu-sainte-justine.org](http://www.chu-sainte-justine.org)

Lifeprint website on American Sign Language:  
[www.lifeprint.com](http://www.lifeprint.com)



### Softwares for children 1 year old and up:

Up to Ten :  
[www.uptoten.com](http://www.uptoten.com)

Music for children's indian massage:  
[www.shantalamusic.com](http://www.shantalamusic.com)

### Free nursery rhymes sites:

[www.comptine-enfants.com](http://www.comptine-enfants.com)  
[www.momes.net](http://www.momes.net)  
[www.fpfc.bc.ca](http://www.fpfc.bc.ca)

### Stay-at-home moms share their tips and tricks:

[www.mamanszen.com](http://www.mamanszen.com)

### Bilingual Language Development:

Fédération des parents francophones de C-B :  
[www.fpfc.bc.ca](http://www.fpfc.bc.ca)

Bilingual Monkeys :  
[www.bilingualmonkeys.com](http://www.bilingualmonkeys.com)

Franco Zone :  
[www.affc.ca/francozone](http://www.affc.ca/francozone)



## For families living in the Yukon

### **Child Development Centre**

1000, boulevard Lewes, Whitehorse, Y1A2C6  
867-456-8182 OU SANS FRAIS 866-835-8386,  
[www.cdcyukon.ca](http://www.cdcyukon.ca)

### **Centre de la francophonie**

302, rue Strickland, Whitehorse, Y1A 2K1  
867-668-2663

#### **Association franco-yukonnaise (AFY)**

Wide range of family resources  
[www.afy.yk.ca](http://www.afy.yk.ca)

#### **L'Aurore boréale**

Yukon's only French newspaper  
[www.auroreboreale.ca](http://www.auroreboreale.ca)

#### **Les EssentiElles**

Activities and resources for new parents  
[www.lesessentielles.ca](http://www.lesessentielles.ca)

#### **Partenariat communauté en santé (PCS)**

Programs and services related to health and wellness  
[www.franco-sante.org](http://www.franco-sante.org)

### **Learning Disabilities Association of Yukon (LDAY)**

Support for people with learning disabilities and their parents, teachers, employers and other caregivers  
[www.ldayukon.com](http://www.ldayukon.com)

### **Yukon Literacy Coalition**

Some literacy programs in French  
[www.yukonliteracy.ca](http://www.yukonliteracy.ca)

### **Canadian parents for French**

Parents who want to ensure that their children will have the opportunity to become bilingual in the Canadian school system.  
Kristina Craig, présidente 867-336-0303  
[yukoncpf@gmail.com](mailto:yukoncpf@gmail.com)

## Sources of inspiration

Modules transdisciplinaires, Module 3 - Maturation et vulnérabilité. Objectif 32 – Développement normal du langage et ses troubles.

Rédaction : Claude BURSZTEJN

[www.univ-rouen.fr](http://www.univ-rouen.fr)

Le développement du langage

[www.doctissimo.fr/html/psychologie/psycho\\_pour\\_tous/enfant\\_bebe/ps\\_1294\\_developp\\_langage.htm](http://www.doctissimo.fr/html/psychologie/psycho_pour_tous/enfant_bebe/ps_1294_developp_langage.htm)

*Comment la parole vient aux enfants*, Boysson-Bardies (de) B., *Le langage à l'école maternelle*, Odile Jacob, Paris M.E.N, direction de l'enseignement scolaire

*Parler ensemble en maternelle*, Sceren Florin Agnès; Presses universitaires de Rennes  
[ww2.ac-poitiers.fr/ia17-pedagogie/IMG/pdf/developpement\\_parole\\_2\\_ans\\_6\\_ans-2.pdf](http://ww2.ac-poitiers.fr/ia17-pedagogie/IMG/pdf/developpement_parole_2_ans_6_ans-2.pdf)

*Le développement du langage chez le jeune enfant*  
Étude demandée par la commission de la Culture et de l'Éducation du Parlement européen, Kern, Sophie; Laboratoire Dynamique du Langage, Lyon, France



*Les difficultés phonologiques chez l'enfant*, Bowen, Caroline;

Chenelière Éducation

*Le développement du langage oral*, Rondal, Jean A.

*Votre enfant apprend à parler*, Rondal, Jean A.

*Coup d'œil sur le langage :*

[www.excellence-jeunesenfants.ca](http://www.excellence-jeunesenfants.ca)

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