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The Ten Key Factors Influencing Successful Multilingualism

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Bilingualism is usually a rewarding experience filled with social and academic gains. However, for some, the process can be a time of anxiety. Many parents often sacrifice the gift of a second or third language in order to spare their children the stress of the learning experience. It would be more advisable for families to gain a clear understanding of the factors they have an influence over and those factors which are in nature's hands.

In my book *Raising Multilingual Children: Foreign Language Acquisition and Children* I define the "Ten Key Factors in Raising Multilingual Children" which are combined in a unique "recipe" for each person. Aptitude, Timing, Motivation, Strategy, Consistency, Opportunity, the Linguistic Relationship between the Languages, Siblings, Gender and Hand-Use as it reflects cerebral dominance are all important, even in their absence. Awareness of these factors can help parents in their vital roles as guides in their children's language learning process.

(1) **Aptitude**: Each person is born with a certain aptitude for different life skills. People with a high aptitude for foreign languages learn languages easily; people with low aptitude do so with difficulty. You cannot influence how much aptitude a person has, but you can make the most of what exists. It is estimated that aptitude for foreign languages is on par with other talents, with roughly 10% of the population enjoying its benefits.

(2) **Timing**: The windows of opportunity are times when certain skills can best be learned. There are three windows of opportunity for foreign language acquisition. The first and "easiest" is from birth to nine-months. The second is between four and eight years old due to children's lower inhibition levels. The third is from nine-years and onwards as the brain reaches its full size (though not in terms of neuroconnections).

(3) **Motivation** includes both positive versus negative, and internal versus external factors. Falling in love is a fantastic motivating force, as is hatred. Helping a child find his own reason to learn a language is far more effective than forcing a language on him.

(4) **Strategy** means making a conscious decision to approach language development in a certain way and (5) **Consistency** is each person's (including parents') ability to stay true to the agreed upon strategy. There are at least seven thoroughly research strategies, including the one-person-one-language approach. No strategy is more efficient than another, though it has been shown that it is easier to be consistent with OPOL, for example, than with using "time" (dinner time, weekends, etc.) as a guiding strategy.

(6) **Opportunity** is the daily use of the language(s) in meaningful situations. The amount of time an individual can spend actually using the target language(s) is the single factor which separates adult and child bilingual success. Harley (1986) actually showed that adults are superior to children when learning a foreign language if and when they dedicate the same amount of time to the task.

(7) **The Linguistic Relationship between Languages:** Does the native language share roots with the second language? If so, the second language is easier to learn due to the similarity of grammar, vocabulary and sound systems.

(8) **Siblings** can have a positive as well as negative effect. In the positive, siblings learn a great deal from one another as they have a greater number of verbal exchanges and conversations in a day. However, in the negative case, one child may dominate the language exchange and stunt the other's development.

(9) **Gender:** Sexist as it may sound at first, we now have the technology to see how boys and girls approach language from different parts of the brain and this is influential in both first, second and subsequent languages.

(10) Most people have their main language area of the brain in the left hemisphere, but a small percentage (30%) of those who write with their left hand and five percent of those who write with their right hand actually have language spread over a greater area. This group may favor different teaching methods, and thus **Hand-Use**, as it reflects cerebral dominance, makes up the last of our ten factors.

Every individual will combine the Ten Factors differently. Such individuality is what gives researchers and educators awe at the human capacity for language, and what challenges parents and teachers to emphasize an individual approach to the process. It is also the source of anxiety and stress for many families as no one can tell you the "right way" to approach the bilingual or multilingual family experience. What parents can do, however, is determine their children's own personal recipes and make the most of each of the factors influencing their success.