

## Avoiding the dreaded Point of No Return

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As children enter the school system, they often reject their heritage language (or minority language) in an attempt to assimilate. They are also challenged by the effort it takes for them to communicate effectively in a language that feels less and less fluid for them.

There is often a *point of no return* with children that *choose* not to speak their heritage language (as opposed to those who just struggle with it due to lack of exposure). Once they reject the language, these children become increasingly averse to responding in their heritage language, often leading to their parents pressuring them to stop speaking the community language. This inevitably results in a vicious cycle that becomes very difficult to break.

Once a child entirely refuses to speak a language, it is very difficult to get them to change his/her mind. As we all know, it is hard for any person, be it a child or adult, to renege on a definitive statement (“I *will not* speak Persian”). All parents of bilingual children should keep an eye out for cues that their child might be heading in the direction of rejecting their heritage language. If a child is beginning to show signs of rejection (exclusively responding in the community language, for example), it is imperative that parents *not* force the child to speak in the native language, rather, empower him/her to become part of the process and *actively* participate in preserving the language at home.

### Ways to empower your children:

1. Bring them into the process. Discuss the fact that you need their help to practice speaking your heritage language or you'll forget it.
2. Expose your child to other children that speak the language in a closed environment - *not public* - as often as possible. In a public environment, the children are more likely to speak the community language to each other. In these play dates, as tempting as it is to spend time with the other parents, take turns engaging and playing with the children in the minority language.
3. Read to them in the heritage language *daily*. You can do this by translating books from English if this is your preference as it is mine.
4. Make up stories and fairytales *daily*. The beauty of this is that you are not limited by the context of a book - you can embellish your story to your (and your child's) content while feeding their imagination. Have them participate in the storytelling. Use language that is increasingly sophisticated and articulate clearly so that they may hear and learn new words so that they may develop a richer repertoire.
5. Speak only one language to your child - the minority language. Even if you feel a little bit rusty, you can use this as an opportunity to increase your own fluency. If you have more than one child, encourage the older sibling to help you teach the younger one.
6. Whenever your child speaks to you in your community language, repeat the sentence back for them to repeat in your heritage language. In this scenario, you are not *responding* to the statement (“oh, you want some water?”) you providing the language they need to repeat back to you (“Say I want some water please”). The key here is consistency. If you respond in kind *each and every time*, eventually your child will use the words s/he knows so as to avoid the back and forth/translating.

7. Let your child attempt to finish his/her thoughts without putting words in his/her mouth, even if it slows down your conversation.
  - a. Instead of finishing your child's sentences, you can offer guidance when s/he gets stuck. You can ask "do you mean *dog*?" When s/he responds affirmatively say: "what did you mean?" so that s/he can repeat the full sentence back again.

Conversations may be tediously slow to start, but in time you should notice a reduction in the level of effort your child makes if allowed to complete their own thoughts and sentences.

8. If you sense your child is speaking in your community language out of laziness, try asking to repeat the last sentence because you didn't understand it. Remind them to think about what they want to say before repeating the sentence. Note, never tell a child you do not understand a language if this is not true as this models deceptive behavior.
9. As difficult as this may be, try not to speak the community language to other people who speak your language in front of your child (this includes a spouse or family member). Hearing us do this sends them conflicting messages, as does code switching.
10. Some families find it helpful to make an announcement that, as of a specific time, they will no longer be speaking their community language at home. Ritualizing (blowing out candles and eating a celebratory meal, for example) can help make this a special and memorable occasion. Incentives can also be helpful: *"if we go for one week without speaking a word of English, we'll go camping."*
11. Remember that it is not your child's fault if s/he doesn't speak your language. It can be helpful to ask your children to support you so that you do not respond when spoken to in the community language.

For example, your child can give you a "ticket" every time you do not prompt them to repeat a sentence in your heritage language. Once you collect a certain number of tickets (~20), you will have to do something you really *really* don't like. Some of the families we work with opt to eat a worm once they collect 20 tickets. The point of this is for the consequences to be real so that you, the parent, may get the help you need to be more disciplined.

12. You should *never* be stern with your child when asking him/her to speak your language. With loving and playful yet consistent encouragement, your child will soon embrace his/her heritage language.

Every family has its own culture, just like every child is different. There is no formula for how to get this to work, but where there is a will, I know there is always a way.

The key is to determine whether this is a priority for your family. If it is, it will come at the cost of other things – offending your in-laws for example – but hopefully the benefits will outweigh the costs by leaps and bounds.

*For support maintaining a multilingual family, please email [colab@golestankids.com](mailto:colab@golestankids.com).*