One out of five people in the United States speaks a language other than English at home. In today's interconnected world, these so-called “heritage languages” are a valuable asset. Children who grow up speaking a heritage language have many advantages, including more career and personal opportunities. As parents, your support and involvement are essential to helping your children develop their home language so that they can make the most of these opportunities.

TWO IS BETTER THAN ONE

If you are concerned that speaking another language will interfere with your child’s ability to master English and/or advance in school, consider this: Multilingual students actually perform better on standardized exams in reading comprehension, vocabulary, and math, than their monolingual peers. Overall, studies show that bilingualism enhances children’s cognitive abilities, boosts school performance, and fosters the development of bicultural adaptation – the ability to feel comfortable and thrive in two cultures. Bicultural adaptation can improve self-esteem, school involvement, and more.

In the home, speaking the heritage language has its own advantages, such as promoting family togetherness and facilitating the transmission of values and cultural norms across generations.

MAKING THE MOST OF THE HERITAGE LANGUAGE

Naturally, the more that your children get to hear and use their heritage language as they are growing up, the more skillful they will become at it. In addition to speaking the heritage language at the home as much as possible, some simple activities you can do to promote fluency are:

- Socializing with local heritage-language speaking families;
- Participating in events organized by local heritage communities;
• Listening to music and watching TV in the heritage language;

• Encouraging your children to interact with relatives and friends abroad through social media;

• Reading to your child on a regular basis and having reading materials in the heritage language at home.

Beyond the home, school programs that teach reading and writing and introduce children to the language used in formal situations are very important from the point of view of attaining higher levels of proficiency associated with professional fields. Because reading and writing develop slowly over time as children mature, instruction should extend as long as possible, ideally, from elementary school to college. The type and availability of instructional programs for heritage language speakers vary by language and location. The most common options include:

• **Community-based schools:** Many ethnic communities in the United States have established schools to support heritage language learning. These come in different formats, such as weekend, afterschool, or summer programs, and sometimes are affiliated with a local church or a foreign organization. Information about existing programs is available through local heritage-speaking community organizations. If you are interested in establishing a program, this article is a good starting point:

• **All-day schools:** Many schools offer instruction in the heritage language, be it in the form of bilingual or dual-language immersion programs or foreign language electives. To maximize learning, heritage language-specific instruction, as opposed to instruction aimed at students with no background in the language, is preferable.

• **Study abroad programs:** For older children, studying in a country where the heritage language is spoken presents many benefits. Research shows that in addition to improving their language skills, heritage speakers who participate in study abroad programs gain self-confidence and deepen their cultural knowledge. In general, travel abroad, with or without formal study, is one of the best ways to boost your child’s language skills.
MEETING RESISTANCE

Many children go through a phase where they reject their heritage language and culture. This can be very frustrating to parents, and more than that, it puts the heritage language at risk of being lost. If this happens, children typically come to regret the loss when they grow up. Keeping children exposed to their home language, even if they are only hearing it, is essential to preventing language loss during this stage. Other considerations to keep in mind are:

- Many children see the heritage language as an obstacle to fitting in with their monolingual peers. Providing opportunities for children to get together with their heritage-speaking peers can help address this issue.

- Children who are criticized or ridiculed when they speak the heritage language can develop “language shyness,” which leads to avoiding the language. Focusing on what children can do in the heritage language - as opposed to what they can't do - can boost their linguistic self-esteem and combat language shyness.

- It is also common for children to internalize negative societal messages about immigrants and their languages. Talking to your children about the benefits of bilingualism and the achievements of their home culture can help counter these messages and instill cultural and linguistic pride.

In time, bilingual children enter a new phase when they actually seek out opportunities to use and expand their heritage language skills. If they have succeeded in maintaining their heritage language, they are now well poised to reap the rewards of bilingualism.

THE PAYOFF

As parents, investing in the heritage language may well be one of the best contributions that you can make to your children’s future. Efforts in that regard will likely pay rich dividends by way of professional and personal rewards.