

## How To Get Your Kids To Speak Your Language

By Frank Gerace Note: This experience had to do with preserving Spanish for our kids but the principles are valid for anyone trying to help their kids speak and preserve any language and culture.

### COUNTRY OF MANY PEOPLES

This country,, (The authors raised their kids in the United States but they believe that their experience can be useful for people in other non-spanish-speaking countries.) This country is made up of people from all over the world. We or our parents came from Latin countries. We now live here. We function in two different worlds, the American world and the world of our parents. All of us live in these two different worlds in different ways. Some of us were born in the countries our parents came from; others of us were born here. This makes a difference in how and how much we live in our two worlds.

### COUNTRY OF MANY LANGUAGES

The one thing that is most important in our parents' world is their language which is also ours in different ways. The Spanish language of our parents is an issue to all of us every day. We may be proud to speak it well. We may be ashamed at not speaking it well. Some of us may have gone through periods of trying not to speak it because we wanted to speak English better. We may only speak it when we come across someone who needs help in understanding English. We may only remember some sayings of our grandparents or children's songs taught to us by our parents.

You may want to review (or study it for the first time) your Spanish. We could only find one reference for you. It is expensive and is a textbook, not too appealing but complete. Take a look at *Nuevos Mundos, Spanish for Native Speakers 2nd Edition, Workbook : Curso de espanol para estudiantes bilingues*&quot;

F. Bruce Robinson, assistant director in the National Endowment for the Humanities' division of education programs asks &quot;How does America preserve this important resource of people who are proficient in other languages? Instead of trying to depress the knowledge these students come to school with, we ought to be trying to build on it.&quot; (Chronicle of Higher Education, Feb. 2, 1994, page A15)

### OUR CHILDREN AND OUR LANGUAGE

We all want our children to speak the language of their heritage. We discount the opinions of those who say that it is better to forget Spanish and to concentrate on speaking English well. These people are just wrong. It does not hurt your English to speak another language; it helps. Spanish is particularly useful to children in their learning English vocabulary. Just today I taught my daughter the difference between vowels and consonants. Knowing Spanish really helped with the idea of the consonants. I told her that the consonants have no voice; they can only be pronounced with the vowels. The con-sonants suenan con the vowels.

But although most of us agree that it is a good thing for our kids to speak Spanish, most kids in the US whose parents were born in Latin American countries do not speak Spanish well.

Even if both parents speak Spanish at home, quite often the kids answer their parents in English. Look around at your Latin friends and relatives and you will see that most give up on teaching their kids to speak Spanish. Chicano and Puerto Rican families seem to have a little better luck than Latinos from other countries with keeping Spanish alive in their barrios but even their younger generation is losing fluency in Spanish.

However, parents who want their children to speak Spanish can go against the current and set the stage for their children to grow up speaking Spanish. It is not easy. Most families fail in their resolve but it can be done. This report will give some hints on how to improve your chances.

### REASONS FOR OUR CHILDREN TO SPEAK SPANISH

There are many reasons why it is good for the kids to speak your language. One obvious reason is the advantage that it might be for them in the job market. As long as we live in a world with shrunken distances and growing international trade, someone has to be able to talk with people from other countries.

Professor Francisco X. Alarcón of the University of California at Davis says that &quot;now that we are moving toward a global economy, it's O.K. to be bilingual in the U.S.&quot; (Chronicle of Higher Education, Feb.2, 1994, page A15)

Another good reason for you to work at your children's learning to speak Spanish is because it will make you proud to hear the compliments of your friends and countrymen because your children are able to speak your language. You grow in prestige as a person who values your roots.

Your children will also be able to speak with their relatives thanks to improved phone service which is entering the most remote villages of our countries. Direct dialing from the United States is economical enough to be able call a few times a year. The thrill of being able to talk to their uncles, aunts, and cousins will get the kids interested in keeping up their language.

They will be speaking to their relatives not only by phone but will be able to visit them. The experience of knowing another culture will put them ahead of their classmates who have no ties to their roots.

Another reason to encourage our children to speak Spanish can be gotten from the history of a previous group of Latin immigrants to the United States, the Italians.

&quot;Some social critics were aware of the consequences of sudden assimilation. Mary McDowell, a social worker, wrote in 1904:

'The contempt for the experiences and languages of their parents which foreign children sometimes exhibit... is doubtless due in part to the overestimation which the school places upon speaking English. This cutting into his family loyalty takes away one of the most conspicuous and valuable traits of the Italian child.' She attributed the lawlessness of some of the immigrant children to their disrespect for their parents and therefore for all authority.&quot;

(La Storia: Five Centuries of the Italian American Experience, Mangione and Morreale, p. 222)

Finally, the ability to speak another language can be a great boost to a child's self esteem. If the child's parents make it clear that they are proud of their language and of their people, the child will feel closer to his parents and to their heritage, customs, and most importantly to their values.

#### HOW TO ENCOURAGE YOUR CHILDREN TO SPEAK SPANISH

Start early. Try to speak only Spanish to the child. If only one parent speaks Spanish well, that person should always speak Spanish with the child. Do not be afraid of &quot;confusing&quot; the child. Children can identify with different speakers of different languages as they grow up.

1. Read simple stories and fairy tales to the child in Spanish. If you can't find children's literature in Spanish, then make your own translations as you go along. It is not necessary that the translation be perfect. Make up your own stories. It is important for your child to have the memories of hearing nursery rhymes in Spanish.
2. Leave your radio tuned to Spanish language stations. Linguists place a great deal of importance on &quot;passive listening&quot; as part of learning a language, especially for young children.
3. In most areas there is a Spanish language TV station. Put on the Saturday morning cartoons in Spanish.
4. Teach simple nursery rhymes and simple songs to your child. If you don't remember them or if you were not taught any from your parents' traditions, look for them in garage sales, college bookstores, or your local library. Do you remember el patito or pinpón? Look for songs in Spanish.
5. Rent videos in Spanish. They are beginning to be available - and not only in cities with a big Spanish-speaking population!
6. Use proverbs and dichos in Spanish. Some expressions that you would say in English are just as legitimate proverbs in Spanish. Get your child used to hearing them in Spanish. You can do this even if you don't speak Spanish well. For example, say mejor tarde que nunca instead of &quot;better late than never&quot;. Little by little, poco a poco, you'll feel at home with more uniquely Latin expressions. They have something of the culture wrapped up in them. They are stubbornly different from Anglo Saxon proverbs.
7. Get used to saying menos mal in place of &quot;just as well&quot;. The English expression is &quot;better than nothing&quot;; in many South American countries, the equivalent expression is peor es nada. Find proverbs.

8. Don't correct their Spanish when they speak. Don't interrupt the flow of their conversation. Don't make their speaking Spanish to be another homework assignment. It should be something special, even something "secret" in your family. Kids like the mystery and intrigue of having something special of their own. Their speaking Spanish should be a joyful, non-threatening experience. If they make mistakes in their grammar, correct their errors by using the same expression correctly a few minutes after. Don't come right back at them with the correct form or they will begin to feel conscious of their expression and choke off their freedom of expression.

9. Get a good syllabary to teach them the value of the letters and how to read in Spanish. If your child's first language is Spanish teach them to read Spanish before they learn English. You will be doing them a big favor. They will learn to sound out the regular spelling of Spanish which will be a good base on which to learn how to read in English. You will get the same results as those who spend money on expensive Phonics programs.

10. The best way to get your children to grow in Spanish is to send them to spend some time with relatives or friends where they will only speak and hear Spanish. This works best at around 7 years old when children play easily with one another and when Spanish will just come naturally even to the child who has very little exposure to the language. Another good age for a child to be exposed to a Spanish speaking environment is at around 12 years old. At this age, the child has greater mental development and can observe customs and situations in which certain expressions are used. At twelve years old most kids are still pre-adolescents and are not hampered by the embarrassment, self consciousness, and "feeling different" which hold back teenagers from learning a language or customs different from their own.

Use any of the above methods but start! Your efforts will communicate to your children the importance that you give to Spanish even if these efforts are not always completely successful.

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### About the Author

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