

"What language(s), culture(s) and language of education do we want for our child?"

# The values and choices of exogamous couples



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**Editor's note:** Increasing numbers of francophones outside Quebec are forming exogamous couples. This trend is evident not only in Alberta and Western Canada, where the majority of francophones now choose a partner from another language and culture, but in every province and territory. The same holds true even in many communities in New Brunswick, Canada's only officially bilingual province. New Brunswick is also the source of much research in fields related to Acadian and francophone life in a minority setting, including education.

The Centre de recherche et de développement en éducation (CRDE) of the Faculté des sciences de l'éducation at the Université de Moncton promotes and supports educational research and development in a minority francophone environment. The following article, taken from a report prepared for the Réseau d'appui à l'intégration des enfants des ayants droit au système éducatif francophone du Nouveau-Brunswick, is the fruit of research and reflection by three CRDE members. It is intended for francophone-anglophone couples, which account for the vast majority of exogamous couples in Canada.

## Introduction

If you have one or more children and you form a couple in which one parent is a francophone and the other an anglophone, this article will be of interest to you. Your couple reflects Canada's linguistic duality; it embodies the country's two official languages and is shaped by francophone and anglophone culture.

Like all good parents, you want to do what's best for your children, and you plan to make the best choices possible when faced with decisions that affect their lives. You may find these choices and decisions daunting because of the influence they'll have on your children's well-being.

The presence of two languages and cultures in your couple opens the door to enriching experiences, but it also means you face certain challenges. Like other exogamous couples, you may be worried about passing on your language and culture to your children. Maybe you've asked yourself the following questions: Which language(s) and culture(s) do we want them to have? How can we do it? Which culture would we like our children to identify with? What's the best choice for their education?

This article will help you find answers to some of your questions. It's intended to provide you with

information that will help you make better-informed choices for your children regarding language(s), culture(s) and education. Your choices, decisions and behaviour toward language and culture within your couple reflect or will reflect some of your values.

## Your values in relation to your children's education

To gain a better idea of your values regarding your children's education, consider the following questions:

- What are our values in relation to language and culture?
- Do we as a couple value each of our languages and cultures?



- Is it legitimate and fair, or even desirable, for each of us to value his or her language and culture and wish to pass them on to our children?
- Within our couple, what importance do we give to French, the minority language, and to English, the majority language in Canada?
- What levels of written and spoken proficiency do we want our children to reach in English and French?
- Would we like them to value English and French equally?
- What relations would we like our children to have with the francophone and anglophone communities?
- What sense of belonging to each community would we like our children to have?
- Which linguistic and cultural identity would we like our children to adopt?

Your answers reflect your values with respect to bilingualism and biculturalism. These values fundamentally influence your choices and decisions about language and culture in your home — that is, the linguistic and cultural environment you want to create and live in. They will also affect your choice of preschool services (such as daycare and nursery school) and schooling for your children.

If you and your spouse feel that both French and English have considerable value, and if you embrace both francophone and anglophone culture, you will likely want

your children to acquire what we call balanced additive bilingualism.

### Balanced additive bilingualism

Balanced additive bilingualism, as it applies to children of francophone-anglophone couples, means that the children are highly proficient in English and French, possess a strong sense of belonging to both the francophone and anglophone communities, enjoy a strong bicultural identity, display a positive attitude toward francophone and anglophone culture, and give equal social status to both languages.

Parents who opt for balanced additive bilingualism want their children to:

- know the mother tongues of both parents (English and French) very well;
- have a strong sense of belonging to, and a desire to be part of, both the francophone and anglophone communities;
- appreciate the richness of francophone and anglophone culture;
- be very proficient in English and French, and maintain these language skills throughout their lives;

- be able to attend college or university in French or in English; and
- be able to find employment requiring English and/or French language skills.

But what can exogamous couples living in a predominantly anglophone environment do to ensure their children learn two languages and feel they belong to two cultures — in other words, acquire balanced additive bilingualism? Research shows that three environments contribute to the development of balanced bilingualism and biculturalism in a minority francophone setting. What are these environments, and what role can each play in developing balanced additive bilingualism?

### The influence of three environments on the development of balanced additive bilingualism

Children's linguistic and cultural development is shaped by their learning and life experiences in three environments: the family, the school, and the social and institutional milieu. Research shows that in a predominantly anglophone setting, exogamous

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couples who want their children to develop balanced additive bilingualism must base their actions on the following fundamental principle: emphasizing the weaker or more fragile language in the region—in other words, French—will ensure their children develop balanced additive bilingualism.

Each environment plays a specific, complementary role that contributes to the goal of developing balanced additive bilingualism. Let's first look at the role of the social and institutional milieu.

### **The social and institutional milieu**

The social and institutional milieu, especially the language and culture of the electronic and print media, have a very strong influence on the development of children's identity and language skills.

In a majority anglophone setting, it's easy to see the omnipresence of English in electronic media (radio, television, the Internet), print media (newspapers and magazines), films, and public and commercial signage. Most of the community's institutions, with which children have considerable contact, are predominantly English. This contributes to the development of children's English-language skills, knowledge of anglophone culture, sense of belonging to the anglophone community and desire to integrate into it. In short, it contributes to the English part of their identities.

However, such exposure to English often means far fewer contacts with French-language media, thereby hindering the development of

balanced additive bilingualism and leading to the loss of French-language skills in favour of English. That's why it's very important for exogamous couples to ensure their children have constant contact with francophone media, both print and electronic (magazines, newspapers, radio, television, the Internet, etc.). This contributes greatly to children's balanced additive bilingualism by fostering their desire to integrate into the francophone community and enhancing their French-language skills and francophone identity. It should be emphasized that in a minority francophone setting, this does not occur at the expense of the children's anglophone heritage.

To sum up, the francophone and anglophone components of the social and institutional milieu both play a role in children's development of balanced additive bilingualism. The strength of the anglophone component, however, obliges parents to promote the francophone component—which is weaker in a predominantly English setting—if they wish their children to acquire balanced additive bilingualism. We will come back to this point when we discuss the role of family life. For now, however, let us look at the role of the francophone school.

### **Francophone school**

In a majority anglophone setting, the francophone school plays an essential role in developing balanced additive bilingualism, and it's important for parents to understand this role.

French first-language education is designed for students who have francophone roots and who, if they come from exogamous families, may have more than one first language (for example, French and English). Only francophone schools provide an almost completely French-speaking institutional sphere. Instruction takes place entirely in French from kindergarten through the end of high school, except for classes in English language arts. These English courses, contact with the anglophone parent and relatives, the community's predominantly English social and institutional milieu, and frequent contact with anglophone media all guarantee that students will be strong in English and will integrate their anglophone heritage.

French language and culture are an integral part of school life in the classroom and in extracurricular activities. French schools aim not only to meet students' academic needs, but also to encourage the exploration and integration of their francophone heritage. The francophone school system constitutes an institutional milieu that includes the classroom, the school administration, the school board or commission, and the various parent committees. The use of French in every part of this milieu is the *raison d'être* of the francophone school—an environment that, according to the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms*, contributes to the protection and promotion of the language and culture of the francophone minority. Now, what role does the family play in developing balanced additive bilingualism?

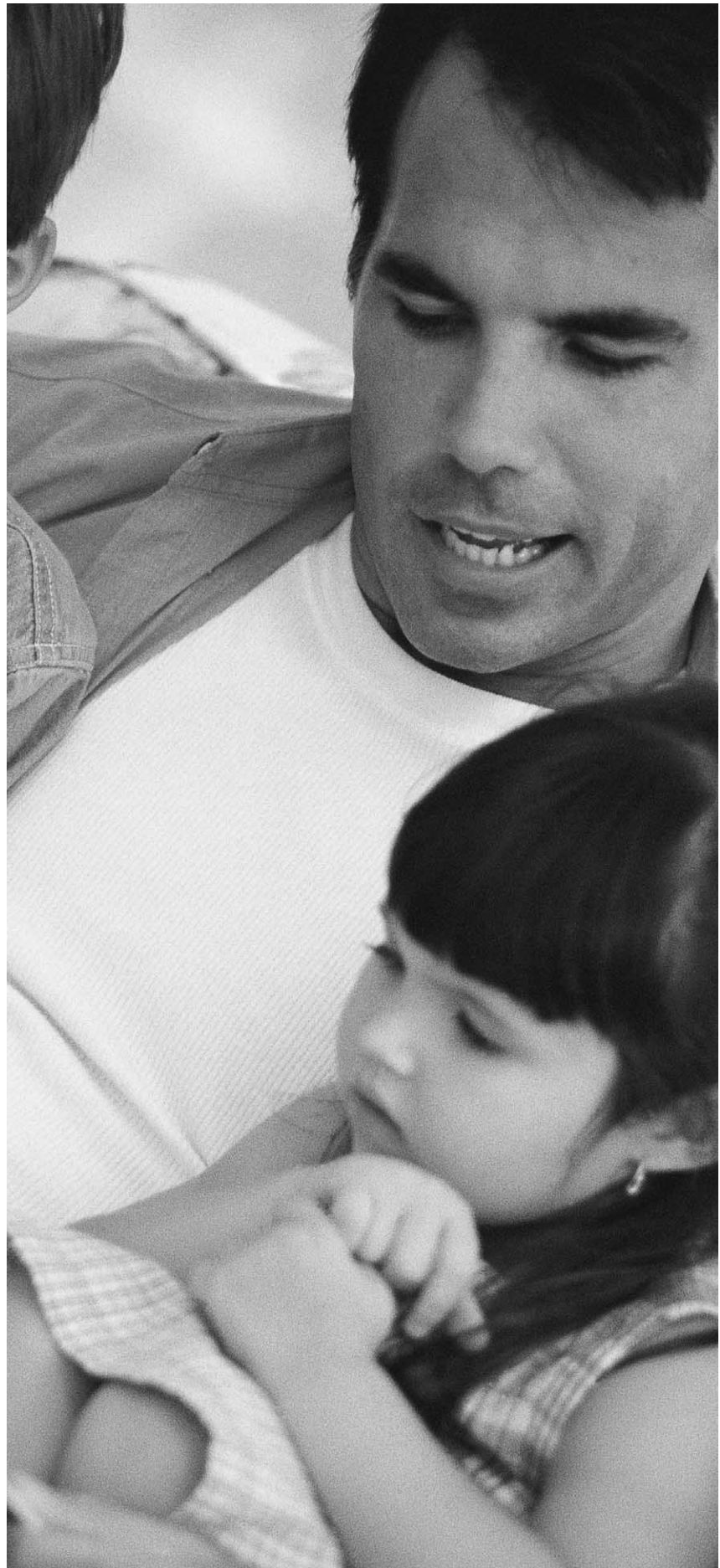
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### The family

Parents are children's first educators, and thus play a decisive role in the education their youngsters will receive at both the preschool and school levels. In the following section, we'll first examine exogamous parents' role with respect to their preschool children, particularly in preparing them for francophone school. We'll then discuss these parents' role vis-à-vis their school-age children, focusing on how they can participate when their children attend a franco-phone school.

#### *Exogamous parents' role with respect to their preschool children*

Many parents ask themselves these two questions: how can we pass on French language and culture to our children, and what can we do to prepare them for French school? Parents play a crucial role in their children's acquisition of balanced additive bilingualism. Research has shown how important the first years of life are to a child's cognitive, affective, social and physical development. In terms of language and culture, preschool children's experiences enable them to gain the knowledge, basic skills and personal qualities they will use throughout their bilingual development.





For exogamous couples living in a majority anglophone setting, francophone parents must take on specific responsibilities if they wish to pass French language and culture on to their children and prepare them for francophone school. These parents act as singular models whose commitment to French language and culture shows pride in their francophone identity as well as a sense of belonging to the francophone community. Through daily life as a francophone and participation in francophone community activities, these parents profoundly influence their children and show how highly French language and culture should be valued.

Anglophone parents also play a crucial role in their children's bilingual and bicultural development. Not only do they pass on their English language and culture, but they can show appreciation for French and support measures taken by their francophone spouse to pass on French language and culture in preparation for francophone school. By showing respect for French, encouraging its use inside and outside the home, and being present when their francophone spouse carries out an activity in French with their children, anglophone parents also become models who demonstrate the importance and value placed on French language and culture.

Naturally, it's important that both parents respect and support one another in their efforts to pass on both languages and cultures to their children.

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Concretely, for exogamous couples who want their children to develop balanced additive bilingualism, francophone parents will speak French at home and read to their children in French starting at birth. They'll provide a variety of opportunities for their children to learn and know French language and culture. Listening to French-language radio, watching television or movies in French, listening to French music or participating in French-language activities in the community — all these actions help prepare children for francophone school. It goes without saying that anglophone parents' encouragement and support for these French-language activities is of critical importance.

***Exogamous parents' role with respect to their school-age children***

How can parents participate in their children's francophone schooling? The school alone cannot bear the entire responsibility for passing on French language and culture and developing children's francophone identity. The school can only continue the work begun at home. It therefore acts as a partner to parents in their children's learning, maintaining and mastering of French, forming a francophone identity and integrating into the francophone community.

As the school's primary partners, parents are called upon to play a major role throughout their children's schooling. Children need their parents' presence, love, support and encouragement in order to succeed at school. Collaboration among staff, parents, students and the community is vital and contributes greatly to children's educational success. Children who see that their parents and the staff enjoy an open, transparent, healthy relationship based on trust and mutual respect will rely on these adults to succeed in school. Adults become mentors or guides in whom children can have confidence and with whom they can share their successes and difficulties at school.

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More concretely, parents can help their children by adopting favourable attitudes toward French school and participating in school life. They can also support their children's schoolwork and homework by providing French-language resources such as books, magazines and software. It's important to foster a home environment that is conducive to studying. Parents who value study, who promote learning and who empower their children academically display favourable attitudes toward school.



It's also vital to encourage good work habits, see mistakes as learning opportunities and keep abreast of children's education.

Depending on their ability to understand, speak and write French, anglophone parents will be able to participate in their children's francophone education in various ways. One of the most important elements is for anglophone parents to value French and francophone education, and to support their francophone spouse's participation in the children's education. The anglophone parent who doesn't understand French can help with mathematics and English classes, among other things. In short, it's essential that anglophone parents also show an interest in their children's academic work.

Exogamous couples can participate in academic life in various ways, including sitting on parent committees, doing volunteer work, etc. They can offer assistance in the classroom, in activities that occur during the school day and with extracurricular activities.

Remember that, in a majority anglophone setting, the francophone school is one of the only places where almost everything happens in French. By respecting this francophone space and upholding French as the common language when dealing with teachers and administrators, exogamous couples show their children that French is important, and thus help their youngsters develop balanced additive bilingualism.

### Conclusion

Choosing to have your children acquire balanced additive bilingualism depends first and foremost on your values as a couple with respect to francophone and anglophone language and culture. The more your couple is united in wishing to pass on both languages and cultures, the more you can agree on the need to be well-informed and decide together on the actions you would like to take to ensure your children achieve this type of bilingualism. You will have understood the role each of you can play, as well as the roles of your families, the francophone school, and the social and institutional milieu in reaching this objective.

***Research shows that in a minority francophone setting, children from mixed couples who have spoken French with their francophone parent and attended francophone school have become not only highly proficient in French, but also highly proficient in English, at levels comparable to those of children who attend English schools and have anglophone parents.***

Remember that in a minority francophone setting, exogamous couples that have succeeded in passing along both languages and cultures have emphasized the minority language and culture — that is, French. The francophone parent has spoken French with the children and the couple has chosen francophone schooling.

Research shows that in a minority francophone setting, children from mixed couples who have spoken French with their francophone parent and attended francophone school have become not only highly proficient in French, but also highly proficient in English, at levels comparable to those of children who attend English schools and have anglophone parents<sup>1</sup>. This is made possible by the anglophone parent's contribution, English courses in the francophone school, and the predominantly anglophone social and institutional milieu.

The goal of helping your children develop balanced additive bilingualism is a challenge that requires perseverance and a large capacity

for dialogue on the part of each of you as well as your children. But it is also highly rewarding. From the testimonials we have heard, it's clear that parents are especially pleased to have passed along their linguistic and cultural heritage. At the same time, the children who have received this dual heritage are very grateful to their parents.

1 Landry, Rodrigue, et Allard, Réal (1997). L'exogamie et le maintien de deux langues et de deux cultures : le rôle de la francité familialescolaire. *Revue des sciences de l'éducation*, 23, 561-592.