

Culture for Kids: Raising Global Citizens

Tips to integrate language and culture
into our children's lives

BY TARYN ZIER



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Panel Discussion

"We all want our children to be comfortable in this increasingly global world. But how can we best help them understand and respect the different cultures around us?"

This was the focus of a dynamic panel discussion which took place on May 15th in Seattle, Washington. The event was organized by Sponge, a language program for young children and their caregivers in the Seattle area. Four local experts were invited to speak about the benefits of early language learning and to share their experiences and ideas for integrating language and culture into young children's lives. Topics focused on different approaches, local resources and ways that language and culture promote compassion.

The panelists:

- **Kelly Aramaki** (Principal, John Stanford International School)
- **Harriet Cannon** (M.C., LMFT Specializing in culture, language & identity)
- **Corey Heller** (Founder & Director, Bilingual/Bicultural Family Network)
- **Kevin P. Henry** (Diversity Program Coordinator, City of Bellevue)
- Moderator: **Jackie Friedman Mighdoll** (Founder & President, Sponge)

Many of us live in culturally-diverse cities, where heritage and differences are honored and valued, but how do we make the most of this? Integrating language and culture into our children's lives helps them connect to others both in their own community and also in the greater world.

Sponge, which offers foreign language classes to young children in the greater Seattle, Washington area, hosted a panel discussion in May 2008 where local experts shared their thoughts on a topic they are passionate about: culture for kids. The participants on the panel were Kelly Aramaki (Principal, John Stanford International School), Harriet Cannon (M.C., LMFT Specializing in culture, language & identity), Corey Heller (Founder & Director, Bilingual/Bicultural Family Network), Kevin P. Henry (Diversity Program Coordinator, City of Bellevue) and the moderator was Jackie Friedman Mighdoll (Founder & President, Sponge). Although the talk focused on the benefits of early language learning and cultural exposure in raising global citizens, the discussion repeatedly emphasized the importance of parents. When children see their parents interested in other languages and cultures, they are more likely to share this interest, especially if they are getting additional exposure in school or in the community.

So, as a parent, what can you do? Here are some of the panelists' top tips:

1. **Incorporate language learning in your routine.** Make learning another language a fun family adventure. Take a class together or learn from a bilingual relative. Show your enthusiasm and your child's will grow, too.
2. **Get to know people of different cultures.** Children begin to appreciate cultural differences when someone they admire comes from a different background than their own. Having a friend or beloved teacher who is of another ethnicity helps children move beyond the comfort of similarity. As one panelist noted, cultural differences are in the eye of the beholder.
3. **Increase your exposure.** Once you start learning another language, increase your exposure by sending your child to an immersion school, joining a playgroup in another language, watching bilingual media, attending multicultural events, vacationing or living abroad, or hosting an exchange student.
4. **Lobby for language opportunities.** If you are unable to find existing opportunities in your neighborhood, get a network of like-minded parents together to set up a new playgroup. If your child is in school, lobby the PTA for in- or after-school language programs. Many schools are interested in offering a language component in their curriculum—help speed things up by becoming a language advocate.
5. **Figure out what works for your family.** Creativity and flexibility are important. Try speaking another language on certain days or during a certain activity. Experiment until you find the right fit for your family and don't force language upon your child. Be sure to constantly evaluate your child's teachers and programs to make sure they are relevant and motivating.
6. **Start them when they are young.** It is easiest to make language and culture a part of your child's existence in the early years, when their brains are primed for language acquisition and they are open to new experiences. But, of course, it's never too late! Take the time now to seek out opportunities for your child.

In the not-so-distant past, we weren't 'supposed to' raise children with another language, and now research shows the immense benefits of doing just that. As we appreciate diversity and help our kids recognize and act on opportunities for compassion, we will be well on our way to raising global citizens. ❖

Taryn Zier is the Marketing Director for Sponge and takes Spanish classes there with her two children, ages 2 and 4. To learn more about Sponge or early language learning research, visit www.spongeschool.com, and for language resources, visit www.biculturalfamily.org.

