

MAMMA LINGUA

STORIES FOR EVERYONE, NO EXCEPTIONS

BY GRAZIELLA FAVARO



1. All children need stories.

They need stories to use their imagination and to remember, stories to be listened to and told, shared and cherished over time. Stories become a home and a refuge to live in, an anchor and a raft to support them, pebbles and crumbs to help them find their way home. Telling and listening to stories play a central role in the emotional, cognitive and linguistic growth and development of all children. No exceptions.

4. The mother tongue is a home.

Many educational professionals still believe that children cannot grow up bilingual and consequently advise immigrant parents to abandon their native language. The risk is that an emotional and linguistic gap is created between generations, as well as transmitting a poor and wooden language. The mother tongue is like the home; it is not a dress or a glove that you take off and put on; it deeply permeates history and personal identity.

7. Enriching the family environment with books and stories.

In order to support parents' efforts to bring up their children elsewhere and alleviate their loneliness, it is important for them to be able to draw from resources, books, materials and linguistic assets in their mother tongue to enrich and expand family stories. This is more likely to happen in situations where there are larger national communities that can self-organise. It is more difficult in cases in which immigrant families are isolated or scattered geographically.

10. Building bridges of words between the language spoken at home and that of the country in which one grows up.

Narratives and stories represent bridges and threads that link childhoods and create narrative communities. Alongside the mother tongue, the language of the country in which one grows up makes room for new discoveries and new words, thanks to books and stories.

2. Migration carries the risk of growing up with a limited vocabulary.

Children of immigrants are at risk of growing up with fewer stories. This can happen for a number of reasons: the absence of grandparents and extended family in the new country, the limited amount of time parents can devote to storytelling and the absence or scarcity of books and linguistic materials for children in their mother tongue.

5. Every language is valuable.

There are no top-tier or lower-tier languages – all are precious and worth passing on. Growing up bilingual represents an opportunity. It means developing a more open and creative way of thinking, learning other languages with greater ease and developing different ways of looking at the world. Quality learning of Italian as a second language is the school's job and responsibility. The families' responsibility is to create the conditions for the transmission and development of the mother tongue by creating an environment rich in storytelling.

8. The presence of mother-tongue books in libraries shows that it has an inherent value.

Because the public library is a valued and revered place, the fact that there are books in one's mother tongue gives children of immigrants an immediate message of appreciation for their native culture, often ignored or devalued, and of their own belonging in general. At the same time, this presence conveys the symbolic and important message that every language and culture has value to all children and their immigrant parents.

3. Which language to tell stories in?

Immigrant parents are also faced with another concern, that of the choice of language in which to tell stories or read to children. On the one hand, most families have the will and desire to pass on their native language to their children. On the other, parents often receive conflicting or opposing messages inviting them to abandon their mother tongue in favour of a second language, even though their competence in Italian is often poor and limited.

6. Raising a child in a foreign country means additional decisions and difficulties.

Parents raising a child in another country find themselves having to make and manage choices and strategies on their own that native parents did not have to, and that the external environment does not support. In addition to diligently and patiently maintaining communication in the mother tongue, they have to offer the child rich, engaging and interesting narrative stimuli every day. This is because it is only through the language of stories and pleasure that young children can enrich their vocabulary and structure their language.

9. Mother tongue storytelling also aids in the acquisition of a second language.

A child who has developed good family communication in his or her mother tongue generally also develops greater self-esteem and can learn Italian well without forgetting the language of origin. The skills that a child has built up in their mother tongue are, over time, also transferred to the new language, and vice versa, thanks to the transfer process that always takes place between languages. Thus, a child who has built up and preserves a reserve of stories and tales in their mother tongue will find it easier to make room for new stories to be exchanged and shared.

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