

## Parenting Tips to raise Tamil speaking kids

It is a sad fact that most of the kids of Tamil origin grow up in the west (USA/Canada/etc.) not knowing Tamil. Based on my personal experience and direct observation so far, I have attempted to list various factors that contribute to this and some potential solutions. They are not in any particular order. If have any comments or suggestions, please contact me.

(I have written this document in English for the following reasons:

- Some of the intended audience for this topic may need to be reached in English.
- It is easier to use English when typing using a standard keyboard.)

	<b>Cause / Symptom</b>	<b>Possible Reasons</b>	<b>Remedy</b>
1.	Kids are in day care from a very early age and thus learn early language skills from others who speak English	Both parents work.	<p>Have grandparents (or other relatives) visit and spend some time with the children during the school year.</p> <p>Have the children visit India every year, if possible.</p> <p>These will expose them to more non-English speaking environments and thus subconsciously motivate them.</p>
2.	Parents do not attach much importance to their children speaking Tamil.	Parents feel that as the kids will live in the west, it does not matter if they do not know Tamil.	<p>As a practical matter, this may be true. However, this implies a conscious rejection of one's roots. Language is one of the basic characteristics that make up one's own image of who he is. If one were to extend this logic, then most of what we follow - dietary habits, cultural behaviors, religion, and other value systems - can be discarded.</p> <p>There are many groups living in various regions of India other than their own but still maintain their traditions including language. (e.g. South Indians in Mumbai, Telugu's in Chennai and elsewhere in Tamilnadu, Saurashtrian's in Madurai, et al). The second and future generations of these groups</p>

	<b>Cause / Symptom</b>	<b>Possible Reasons</b>	<b>Remedy</b>
			<p>Speak the local language outside but still speak their own language at home.</p> <p>Thus, in my opinion, parents should make an effort to encourage their children learn Tamil.</p>
3.	The children refuse to learn/speak Tamil.	The children see no utility in knowing Tamil. They feel that as they will live in the west, it does not matter if they do not know Tamil.	This is a difficult situation. This implies that the children have already reached an age (typically 7 or more) without speaking Tamil much. Parents can apply a suitable combination of the 4 traditional methods of persuasion (sAma, dhAna, bEdha, dhaNdam) and motivate the kids.
4.	The children stop speaking Tamil.	The children feel the peer pressure and they want to fit in with their friends.	This is an identity issue. Parents need to explain the cultural heritage and reinforce that learning/speaking Tamil does not make them inferior in any way compared to their peers.
5.	The children stop speaking Tamil.	As they grow, their command of English has grown, but their level of Tamil has stayed stagnant. Thus, they are not able to communicate in Tamil as quickly and easily as in English.	Parents need to help the children's Tamil improve. For example, when the child says something English, the parent tell the child how to say that in Tamil and have the child repeat it immediately in Tamil. As you follow this method, the child's Tamil will steadily improve.
6.	The children stop speaking Tamil.	The older children speak to the younger ones in English.	Parents need to encourage all the children to speak in Tamil at home. Set it as a house rule to be followed always.
7.	Parents do not speak in Tamil at home.	One of the parents does not know Tamil.	<p>Each parent speaks to the child in his/her language from early on. The child grows up bilingual.</p> <p>This situation is not much different from a child speaking Tamil at home and English outside.</p>

	<b>Cause / Symptom</b>	<b>Possible Reasons</b>	<b>Remedy</b>
8.	Parents do not speak in Tamil at home.	The parents are not comfortable in speaking Tamil as their knowledge of Tamil is limited.	<p>This is a difficult situation. The parents will need to make efforts to improve their Tamil with the help of their friends or others. If the children see the parents making an effort to improve their own Tamil, they will also be motivated.</p> <p>Children do as their parents do. Unless the children see their parents speaking in Tamil, they will not speak it.</p>
9.	Parents do not speak in Tamil at home.	The parents know Tamil well enough but they have got used to speaking in English.	Parents need to make a conscious effort at speaking Tamil at home and with other Tamil speaking friends and relatives. This will automatically help them in speaking in Tamil with their kids.
10.	Parents explicitly encourage children to speak in English at home.	It is felt that kids must learn English as soon as possible so that they are not at any disadvantage when they enter the schooling system.	This is a fallacy. Kids watch enough TV (Barney, Sesame Street, and whole lot of other good and not so good shows), that parents need not worry about their children's knowledge of English when they enter kindergarten.

	<b>Tips</b>	<b>Comments</b>
11.	Set a rule that only Tamil is to be spoken at home.	This is easier to implement when the children are younger. It is best if they grow up with such a rule in place, even as they are in the early stage of language development.
12.	Set a rule that if any non-Tamil sentence is to be spoken, they take permission from the parent before each time they do that.	<p>This sets up the clear expectation that the children must speak in Tamil always.</p> <p>This also puts maximum restriction on the parents as they have to follow the same rule - that is speak in Tamil always - Use English only when absolutely necessary and they do not know how to say that in Tamil.</p>

	<b>Tips</b>	<b>Comments</b>
13.	When a child says something in English or uses an English word in a Tamil sentence, help the child to communicate that in Tamil. Have the child repeat it in Tamil.	This is a learn-as-you-go model. As the child grows and situations change, the parent is available as an on-demand translator-cum-tutor. This ensures good development of normal day-to-day transactional language. Language constructs and vocabulary used mainly in the formal language cannot be obtained by this method.
14.	Tell stories in Tamil. Use stories from rAmAyaNam, lives of saints, etc.	When the child is growing up, telling stories in Tamil imparts key skills such as knowing the sounds used in Tamil and builds a Tamil vocabulary. It also imparts cultural sensitivities and other intangibles.
15.	When children are young and you read them English books, after each sentence in English translate it into Tamil also.	Helps kids know both Tamil and English.
16.	Get some basic Tamil books from India to help the kids learn the Tamil alphabets and the basic writing skills.	There are a number of textbooks but they are intended for children who are in Tamilnadu. The workbooks are good as they try to teach the alphabets and the basic writing/reading skills.
17.	Watch Tamil movies that you feel are appropriate for your children.	Exposes the children to 'standard colloquial Tamil'.
18.	Encourage your relatives and friends to speak to your children in Tamil.	Typical tendency for relatives in India is to speak to the kids coming from the West in English. You may have to emphasize that it is important that everyone speaks to the children in Tamil. The more the children come across Tamil, the more they will be motivated to speak it.
19.	Have the children visit India frequently - every year, if possible.	The more the children see other people speaking Tamil, the more they will be motivated to speak it.  Another benefit of these trips is to develop a stronger cultural identity in your children.
20.	When teaching the children English alphabets, also teach them the Tamil alphabet.	Helps kids know both Tamil and English.

	<b>Tips</b>	<b>Comments</b>
21.	When the children are young and you are helping them to learn reading skills in English, use a bilingual approach. For every word they learn in English, teach them the Tamil word also.	Helps kids know both Tamil and English. Builds a good vocabulary in Tamil.
22.	Use rhyming words to build reading skills and vocabulary.	This is true for both English and Tamil. (e.g. cat, hat, mat, bat, sat) (e.g. kAl, vAl, pAl, ~nAy, pAy, vAy, thAy)
23.	Get several storybooks in Tamil and read it to the children or have them read it to you (depending on child's age and Tamil skills).	This imparts Tamil knowledge as well as some cultural context.
24.	Pick a set of prayers in Tamil and teach it to the kids. Have them say it with you everyday. If necessary, do it before going to sleep.	This has several benefits. They pray everyday. All Tamil prayers are from great saints. The prayers are all great Tamil poetry. Some prayers have interesting stories behind them.
25.	When the child makes any mistake when speaking in Tamil, correct it gently. Do not laugh or otherwise make fun of it.	The child will feel confident in speaking Tamil knowing that if any mistakes are in the process, that is OK.
26.	Whenever the children speak among themselves in English, remind them to speak in Tamil.	For example, a) 'enna, thamizhladhAne pEsaRE?' b) 'thamizhla pEsu' c) etc.  You will find yourself reminding them to speak in Tamil many times a day for several years. Be prepared to do so.
27.	Sit with the kids and read / have them read a few pages from suitable Tamil books. After each sentence / paragraph, translate to simpler Tamil if needed.	Read pancha thanthra stories, rAmAyaNam, etc. This is a time consuming activity. You need to be motivated enough to do this.  This has several benefits. Kids learn the more formal language used in the books. Their vocabulary improves. They see the effort that their parents put into teaching them Tamil.

	<b>Tips</b>	<b>Comments</b>
28.	From time to time, have them write a few words or sentences.	Even though we do not expect the kids growing up in the west to do much writing in Tamil, it is an essential skill.
29.	Play rhyming games with the kids when going on long car trips. Let the kid say a word in Tamil and you come with a rhyming word. That way, it is easy on the kids but still helps them improve their vocabulary.	