

What happens when a child acquires a new mother tongue?

Adoption is a great change in the life of a child. Children adopted from abroad are exposed to a language break in addition to other major upheavals. This may influence the acquisition of the child's new mother tongue.

According to figures from the adoption associations, around 18 000 children from 30 countries have come to Norway through adoption. Research and experience show that the children do very well.

The children adapt quickly and many overtake other children of the same age in motor function at record speed. Still, up to a third of the children adopted from abroad are having problems with language proficiency. This has largely gone undetected in kindergartens and schools, says Åse Kari Wagner at the Reading Research Center.

We realize that minority children may experience problems in learning a new language and we identify children with dyslexia. But the fact that Emma, adopted from China when she was one year old, is more likely to have problems with her Norwegian, is not so well known.

Parrot language

The foreign adopted children, who struggle with language, master everyday skills and have a perfect pronunciation. This is why we are fooled, Wagner says, and continues:

The everyday language is learnt very fast. Children adopted at the age of three to four experience their biological age as different from their linguistic age. Some of these children become very adept at using words and concepts they do not understand. They use language like a parrot and make grown-ups believe they are more advanced in language development than they really are. The children know the words, but do not understand the deeper concepts.

Not even language tests reveal this syndrome. They may show that children can indicate objects from words given, but they reveal nothing about how well the children understand these words, Wagner says.

Break in language acquisition

At adoption language can be put on hold. There is so much else to be tackled that the child has no time for language. Some foreign adopted children may have problems catching up. Factors like low birth weight and little contact with adults in the orphanages before adoption may have some influence. This may hamper language acquisition in early childhood and add to the language break syndrome.

The children have started the acquisition of language, but have to start the process again to adopt a new mother tongue.

Language acquisition and the learning of concepts start at an early age. In the womb hearing is already developing and the child may hear its mother. Research shows that infants prefer the sound and intonation patterns in its mother tongue to foreign languages. When the infant is six months it can babble the sounds of the mother language.

The earlier, the better

It seems that the child's age at adoption and the language break are relevant for language acquisition. The younger they are, the less problems they have in adopting a new language. A three to four year old, who is accustomed to expressing its wishes verbally and who engages in dialogue with children and adults and uses language at play, will naturally want to continue this after adoption. This child will often dive into the language at the deep end before it is ready for it, which, according to Wagner, may lead to superficial language learning.

In school they will break the reading code and read fluently. The problems turn up in the later classes where the linguistic challenges are greater and the children use reading as a means to knowledge learning and information implicit in the text.

Foreign adopted children may have problems when the language becomes dissociated from the context or the here-and-now and the child can no longer rely on pointing it. Children who do not master this de-contextualized language well enough will struggle with spoken messages or instruction loaded with information and have difficulties in following the classroom discourse, Wagner says.

The children may also have problems reading with comprehension. They understand the concepts superficially, but not the deeper significance. These vague problems of the foreign adopted are explained away as lack of concentration.

Lack of action

Unexpected language problems in school may arise because the child's language has not been examined well enough in early childhood. However, they seldom appear without warning. The kindergarten must therefore observe the foreign adopted children's language systematically with appropriate testing, and be particularly careful to give the children appropriate language stimulation.

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