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BILINGUALISM/MULTILINGUALISM

Many people have questions about how to best help children learn language, and the effects of learning more than one language at a time. Did you know that it is very common around the world for children to learn two or three languages at onceⁱ? Here are a few facts:

Are you afraid that using more than one language when your child is young will just confuse him and he will not master either language?

It is true that children may mix the two languages that they use in daily life and say something like “*Where is my chapeau?*”. This is not a sign of confusion, but a way for them to express themselves when they do not know the word in the second languageⁱⁱ. They are just using the words that are available to them to get their message across. We adults all do that too and in fact children are often just copying what they hear around themⁱⁱⁱ.

What are the advantages of multilingualism?

Children who are exposed to more than one language early in life:

- Are able to understand and talk with more people;
- Can communicate with their relatives who may speak an ancestral language;
- Are more sensitive to people from other cultures;
- Have more employment opportunities in adult life;
- Have sharpened cognitive skills^{iv}.

What is the best way to help my child learn more than one language at a time?

There is not just one way to learn a second or third language. Some ways are:

- One language at home and another language at daycare;
- Two languages at home;
- Two languages at home and a third at school;
- Two languages at the same time;
- One after the other;
- A second language can also be learned later in life.

Should I only speak one language and my spouse another? How should we manage? If my child is going to French school should we only speak French?

What is important is to expose your child to rich and varied language models.

- Read, speak and sing to him in whatever language/s you are most comfortable in. Your partner or relatives and the daycare should do the same in their preferred language. This is a great way to introduce many new words and ideas. It is not necessary to avoid mixing two languages when speaking to your child;
- Trying to use a language that you are not fluent in will just limit your communication, and does not help the child learn that language any faster or better;
- Children need 30-40% exposure in their waking hours to each language to be able to use that language to communicate. And, this has to be maintained over long stretches of time (i.e. years).

Bilingualism/Multilingualism MCH

If they only hear a language once in a while, it will be hard to master it. Ways to increase exposure to a second language are:

- Listening to audiobooks on CD or audio e-books in the second language;
- Watching a movie in the second language;
- Daycare or school or classes in the second language;
- Community activities like library story time, clubs, and sports in the second language.

What if my child has a language delay? Is it a good idea to expose her to another language?

Learning a second language is a good idea, even if your child is delayed.

- This is true for all children, even children with a language disorder^v, autism^{vi}, or an intellectual delay^{vii}. They will learn the second language just like they learned the first language. Learning another language will not cause your child to be more delayed.

Did you know?

- Children who speak their home language fluently do better in school in the second language^{viii};
- It is never too early or too late to learn another language;
- Worldwide, there are more people who speak two or more languages than people who speak one^{ix};
- Speaking more than one language may even delay the onset of dementia later in life^x.

For more information on this topic and for specific examples of children growing up in a multilingual setting, refer to:

Paradis, J., Genesee, F., & Crago, M. (2011). *Dual language development and disorders: A handbook on bilingualism and second language learning* (2nd Edition). Baltimore, MD: Brookes.

ⁱ Grosjean, F. (2010). *Bilingual: Life and Reality*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press.

ⁱⁱ Genesee, F., Paradis, J., & Wolf, L. (1995). *The nature of the bilingual child's lexicon*. Unpublished research report, Psychology Department, McGill University, Montreal, Quebec, Canada.

ⁱⁱⁱ Lanza, E. (1997). Language contact in bilingual two-year-olds and code-switching: Language encounters of a different kind? *International Journal of Bilingualism*, 1, 135-162.

^{iv} Adesope, O. O., Lavin, T., Thompson, T., & Ungerleider, C. (2010). A systematic review and meta-analysis on the cognitive benefits of bilingualism. *Review of Educational Research*, 80, 207-245.

^v Paradis, J., Crago, M., Genesee, F. & Rice, M. (2003). Bilingual children with specific language impairment: How do they compare with their monolingual peers? *Journal of Speech, Language and Hearing Research*, 46, 1-15.

^{vi} Ohashi, J. K. et al. (2012). Comparing early language development in monolingual- and bilingual-exposed young children with autism spectrum disorders. *Research in Autism Spectrum Disorders*, 6, 890-897.

^{vii} Kay-Raining Bird, E., Cleave, P., Trudeau, N., Thordardottir, E., Sutton, A., & Thorpe, A., (2005). The language abilities of bilingual children with Down syndrome. *American Journal of Speech-Language Pathology*, 14, 187-199.

^{viii} Paradis, J. (2011). Individual differences in child English second language acquisition: comparing child-internal and child-external factors. *Linguistic Approaches to Bilingualism*, 1, 213-237.

^{ix} Grosjean, F. (2010). *Bilingual: Life and Reality*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press.

^x Adesope, O. O., Lavin, T., Thompson, T., & Ungerleider, C. (2010). A systematic review and meta-analysis on the cognitive benefits of bilingualism. *Review of Educational Research*, 80, 207-245.