

Bilingual Language Acquisition

Are you bilingual or a polyglot?

Bilingual refers to someone who can speak two languages with reasonable fluency

Multilingual speakers can speak more than two languages fluently. They are also called polyglots! 'Poly' meaning 'many' and 'glot' being the Greek word for 'lingual'.

Monolinguals speak only one language

Our world is becoming increasingly multilingual. Worldwide, it is estimated that;

- there are more second language speakers of English than native speakers
- there are as many bilingual children as there are monolingual children



These trends mean that many children are being raised as bilinguals. Sometimes bilingualism is a necessity, as a child's parents may not be fluent in the majority (dominant) language spoken in the community. In this

situation the child may learn one language at home and another at school.

Sometimes bilingualism is a choice, and parents may wish to expose their child to another language, even if they do not speak a second language themselves. This could be due to the many benefits of being bilingual.

In the 2016 census, there were over 300 separately identified languages spoken in Australian homes. More than one-fifth (21%) of Australians spoke a language other than English at home. After English, the next most common languages spoken at home were Mandarin, Arabic, Cantonese, Vietnamese, Italian and Greek.

How do children learn more than one language?

Bilingual acquisition can take place in one of two ways:

- **Simultaneous Acquisition** occurs when a child is raised bilingually from birth, or when the second language is introduced before the age of three. Children who learn two languages simultaneously go through the same developmental stages as children learning one language. Bilingual children may start talking slightly later than monolingual children, however they still begin talking within the normal range. Simultaneous bilinguals seem to acquire two separate languages right from the beginning of language learning. Very early on, they are able to differentiate their two languages and have been shown to switch languages according to their conversation partner (e.g. speak Mandarin to a Mandarin-speaking parent, then switch to English with an English-speaking parent)

- **Sequential Acquisition** happens when a second language is introduced after the first language is already well-established (generally after the age of three). Children who immigrate to a country where a different language is spoken may experience sequential acquisition. Sequential learning also occurs if a child speaks their first language almost exclusively at home until they begin school, where they are then exposed to a different language

Children who have sequential acquisition of a new language will often experience the following;

- Initially they may continue to use their first language for a brief period, even in the new language learning environment
- They may go through a silent or nonverbal period when first exposed to a second language. This silent period can last anywhere from a few weeks to several months. During this time the child develops their understanding of the new language. This can last from a few weeks to several months and is a time when the child builds their understanding of the language. Younger children usually remain in this phase longer than older children. During this period children may rely on using gestures and single words or short phrases in the second language.
- They will begin to use short or imitative sentences. The child may use one-word labels or memorised phrases such as “I don’t know” or “What’s this?”. These sentences are generally phrases the child has heard and memorised, not phrases constructed out of their own vocabulary or knowledge of the language.
- The child will eventually begin to produce their own sentences. These sentences may be partly memorised but also include some newly learnt vocabulary. At first children can use a learnt ‘formula’ for constructing their sentences. Sentences will often sound very repetitive; however, the child will soon become more and more fluent. It is normal for children to make grammatical errors or produce shorter sentences because they are still missing the grammatical rules of the new language (e.g. “I no want eat apple” instead of “I don’t want to eat an apple”). Some of the mistakes a child makes at this stage are also due to the influence of his first language.

Does Bilingualism cause Language Delay?

In the past it was believed that raising children bilingually would cause language delay. There is no evidence to support this position. Bilingual children do not suffer language confusion, language delay, or cognitive deficit.

Research does show us that;

- Bilingual children start speaking within similar time frames as monolingual children. This is true regardless of the number of languages spoken in the home. If your child is not speaking as expected for their age (in either language) then seek further assessment and advice from a Speech pathologist experienced in working with bilingual children

- Bilingual children can have the same speech and cognitive disorders as monolingual children. Just because your child is bilingual doesn't mean he or she is free from all language disorders! If you are concerned that your child has a speech or language delay then early assessment is best. Please note that recommendations to switch to a being a monolingual household are not supported by evidence and research. If this is the advice given it is recommended that you seek a second opinion.
- Children in a bilingual household don't need to be "taught" a language. Language learning is complex process but it will occur with regular and consistent verbal input in a variety of normal everyday settings



What other myths surround bilingual language?

MYTH - When children mix their languages it means that they are confused and having trouble becoming bilingual.

FALSE. When children use both languages within the same sentence or conversation, it is known as "code mixing" or "code switching". Examples of English-French code-mixing: "big bobo" ("bruise" or "cut"). Parents often worry that this mixing is a sign of language delay or confusion. Code mixing is a natural part of bilingualism and even proficient adult bilinguals will code mix when they converse with other bilinguals. Some researchers regard code mixing as a sign of bilingual proficiency.



MYTH - A person isn't bilingual unless they are equally proficient in both languages.

FALSE. It is rare to find an individual who is equally proficient in both languages. Most bilinguals have a "dominant language" in which they have greater proficiency. A person's dominant language can actually change with age, circumstance, education, social network, employment, and many other factors.

MYTH - An individual must learn a second language as a young child in order to become bilingual.

FALSE. There is a "Critical Period" theory that suggests that there is a window of time (early childhood) during which a second language is most easily learned. This theory has led many people to believe that it is better to learn a second language as a young child. Young children have been found to achieve better pronunciation (language specific accent) than older children or adult second language learners. And they seem to achieve better long-term grammatical skills than older learners. However older children and adults do employ learning and cognitive strategies in their second language learning that is highly beneficial.

MYTH - When raising a bilingual child one parent should exclusively speak one language and the second parent should speak the other language

FALSE. Some parents may choose to adopt the “one parent-one language” approach, where each parent speaks a different language to the child. This is one option for raising a bilingual child, however there is no evidence to suggest that it is the only to raise a child bilingually. There is also no evidence that this method reduces code mixing. Parents shouldn’t worry if they speak both languages to their child and even if they mix the languages.

MYTH - If you want your child to speak the majority language, you should stop speaking your home language with your child.

FALSE. Some parents attempt to speak the majority language (language spoken most in their community/environment) to their child because they want their child to learn that language, even if they themselves are not fluent in the majority language. This can mean that conversations and interactions do not feel natural or comfortable between parent and child. There is no evidence that frequent use of the second language in the home is essential for a child to learn a second language. In addition, a child can become isolated from family members who only speak the home language. Research shows that children who have a strong foundation in their home language more easily learn a second language. Children are also at great risk of losing their home language if it is not supported continually at home



Benefits of Bilingualism

- Bilingual children are better able to focus their attention on relevant information and ignore distractions. Their executive functioning skills have been demonstrated to be better than their monolingual peers
- Bilingual individuals have been shown to be more creative and better at planning and solving complex problems than monolinguals
- Bilingual children exposed to two languages before the age of three appear to have greater empathy for those around them and better ability to read people’s emotional responses and nonverbal cues
- The effects of aging on the brain are diminished and delayed among bilingual adults, especially in those who learnt two languages at a young age. In one study, the onset of dementia was delayed by 4 years in bilinguals compared to monolinguals with dementia
- Bilingual individuals have greater access to people and resources
- In many countries employment rates are higher for bilinguals than monolinguals

When to introduce a second language?

During the 1960’s Lenneberg proposed a critical period existed for second language learning. It was widely considered that unless a child learnt a language between the ages of 2 and puberty they could not gain proficiency in a new language. This theory

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was based on research that indicated that later language learners stored and accessed their second language in different parts of the brain than those learning two languages as a younger child.

What we do know is that adults and older children do bring certain skills to second language learning that allows them to acquire a second language. However young children, particularly those below the age of 3 years develop language in a more unconscious or natural way. Children below the age of three will also go on to have better pronunciation and intonation in both languages. This is the case for children who acquire two languages before the age of 12.

Research also shows us that children who first acquire a language and then in the 3-12 year age range acquire a second language will not achieve the proficiency of a child who speaks two languages from birth. All indicators show that raising a child bilingual from birth will give greater outcomes for children's later language proficiency.

Suggestions for assisting your child to develop bilingually

A helpful strategy for raising a bilingually child is to remember the three R's;

- **Relationship** – relationship is the basis and foundation for all communication. We converse and communicate because we want to establish or strengthen relationship
 - **Repetition** – When we hear vocabulary and language structures presented we learn
 - **Routine** – We build relationships and hear language repeated in everyday events and routines we learn language in a meaningful and real way



You have all the tools you need to build your child's second language. Follow your child's lead and have fun! You will help build your child's second language when you have enjoyable conversations during everyday activities which include rich vocabulary and grammatical sentences.

Some general tips are;

1. **Children learn language best as they interact and play with the important people in their lives on a daily basis. When we respond during these interactions, children feel connected and are motivated to keep interacting.**

How you can help: Carefully observe what catches your child's attention in the moment, wait for your child to send you a message, and listen carefully to what your child is trying to tell you. Then respond with interest, talking about what they have communicated.

2. Children learn words for things that interest them. Follow your child's lead.

How you can help: When you see that your child is interested in something, turn it into a conversation by talking about it. When you include your child's interests in this way, he/she will likely pay attention to what you are saying and he/she is more likely to learn new words.

3. Children learn what they hear most often – they need lots of repetition!

How you can help: By adding language to your everyday activities and experiences, you naturally increase the amount of language your child hears. Any activity is an opportunity for language learning – you can talk about what foods you both like to eat as you prepare snacks, talk about the characters and their actions when you share books together, and think of the new words your child can learn from a visit to the zoo or shop.

4. Flashcards are not the answer! Children learn language through interacting in everyday contexts. They learn best by playing, interacting and talking about the activities of everyday life.



How you can help: Introduce new words when you play and interact with your child. Use every day activities to expose your child to new words. Examples of daily activities include playing, looking at books together, and routines like meals, bath time and getting dressed.

5. Variety is important. A variety of words, experiences and conversational partners is important for your child.

How you can help: Emphasize a variety of words for your child and present them in different contexts. Expose you child to different conversational partners

6. Vocabulary and grammar go hand-in-hand

How you can help: Using short, grammatical sentences when you speak to a child will help build his language skills. Avoid using words on their own or using sentences that don't have the little grammatical sounds and syllables that make a sentence complete.

What activities can I include that will help develop my child's language?

Play and games

- Read and tell stories in both languages, and encourage your child to join in. Use dress-ups and be creative!
- Play games in both languages – for example, 'I spy', bingo or memory.
- Sing songs, dance and play music in your language. Children love music, and melody is a great way to help them remember things.

Community activities

- Look for schools, child care centres or bilingual programs that support your child's use of your first language
- Organise playtime with other children who speak the same first/home language
- Organise visits to or from speakers of the first/home language. If it's possible for you, visiting countries where people speak your first language always boosts children's interest in the culture and ability to speak the language
- Go to the library and borrow CDs, DVDs, picture books, junior fiction and magazines in your first language
- Look out for cultural activities that you and your child can do together to tap into your family's cultural heritage and identity. For example, Harmony Day in March each year is widely celebrated across Australia
- Join a playgroup

At home

- Listen to radio programs in your first language, including popular music programs and channels for teenagers
- Think about what your child is interested in – for example, soccer, music, TV shows, cooking and so on. Try incorporating your first language into these interests. For example, you could find your child's favourite recipe or a typical recipe from your community and cook it together using only your first language.
- Don't give up! Some days it might seem like your child doesn't want to speak in your home language, or even the second language. But just hearing you speak your language will help your child learn it.

Above all remember that language is an expression of our heart. It is language that gives thought and voice to our feelings and our emotions. When you are expressing love to your child or having moments where you bond deeply in your relationships with them, always use the language of your heart. Most often this will be your first language. Language development is a lifelong adventure. Enjoy the journey with your child!

If you talk to a man in a language he understands, that goes to his head. If you talk to him in his language, that goes to his heart.



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