

Bilingualism doesn't hamper language abilities of children with autism: research

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(Medical Xpress) -- Bilingual children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) acquire vocabularies just as rich as monolingual children with ASD, according to research by a bilingualism expert at the University of British Columbia.

Parents in bilingual families often decide to speak only one [language](#), typically English, around their child with ASD because of advice from child development professionals who believe that exposure to two languages might further limit the child's communication skills.

In one of the first studies of its kind, Stefka H. Marinova-Todd, an assistant professor in the UBC School of Audiology and Speech Science, sought to determine whether bilingualism interferes with language development of [children](#) with ASD through a formal comparison of bilingual and monolingual children with the condition. Unlike previous studies, she and her collaborators evaluated children in both of their spoken languages, not just English.

The study, published today in the Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders, tested the vocabulary size of 14 bilingual and 14 English-monolingual metro Vancouver-area children with ASD between three and six years old. The bilingual children all spoke English and either Mandarin or Cantonese.

Editors/reporters: If you would like to speak with a parent of one of the children who participated in the study, please contact Brian Kladko in

UBC Public Affairs or the researcher, Stefka Marinova-Todd, to arrange an interview.

Marinova-Todd and her collaborators – graduate student Jill Petersen (now a practicing speech pathologist) and Pat Mirenda, a professor in the UBC Faculty of Education – found that [bilingual children](#) had a larger total vocabulary than monolingual children. When translation equivalents (two words in each language with the same meaning) were counted only once, the vocabularies of both bilingual and monolingual children were not significantly different.

“We now have data suggesting that children with ASD have the potential to be bilingual, and that speaking Chinese, usually at home, and English at school or pre-school settings does not delay or harm their language development,” Marinova-Todd says. “There is no need for parents to eliminate one of the languages in the child’s environment, especially if that means limiting the amount of communication and interaction in the home, or increasing the stress on the family.”

Previous research has shown that bilingualism sometimes confers cognitive and language-related advantages on children without ASD. Marinova-Todd said further research is necessary to see if that benefit applies to children with [ASD](#), by systematically examining their cognitive skills (for example, the ability to focus on relevant information) and meta-linguistic skills (the ability to explain and apply the rules of language).

Provided by University of British Columbia

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