

Should parents raise kids bilingually?

March 31 2014, by Katherine Demuth



Do children get confused growing up speaking two languages? Or is it beneficial? Credit: Shutterstock

As one in four Australians is now born outside of Australia, many children are growing up with other languages spoken at home. Should parents speak to their child in their first language, or attempt to speak to them in English?

Bilingualism (or multilingualism) is the norm around the world. In many countries children grow up speaking two, if not three or more languages. Thus, we know it is possible to learn more than one language from a young age.

We also know that children are much better at learning another language than adults. It is entirely possible to develop "native speaker" abilities in another language if it is learnt before puberty or, better yet, before the age of seven.

Some studies say bilingual children will lag behind in English, but new studies focus mainly on the advantages.

Bilingual advantages

Recently the focus has been on the advantages of being bilingual, of which there are many. [Studies](#) of bilingual children at schools in Canada show there is a cognitive advantage to knowing more than one language.

It appears that constantly switching from one language to another is like doing [crossword puzzles](#); it exercises the brain.

An important part of succeeding in everyday life depends on our selectively attending to relevant information while ignoring that which is irrelevant. Bilingual children are particularly good at selective attention and inhibiting unnecessary reactions, making the process of learning new rules much faster.

This early flexibility in cognitive function can then be used for many other tasks, giving children a cognitive advantage throughout life.

Being bilingual has even been shown to delay the onset of Alzheimer's disease when compared to [monolinguals](#). [Research](#) is also being

conducted on increased cultural sensitivities due to bilingualism.



Monolingual children face reading difficulties too, so how do you find the cause of reading difficulties in bilingual children? Credit: Shutterstock

The controversy

Parents of bilingually developing children sometimes worry their child is lagging behind their peers in English. Obviously, learning more than one language at once presents a challenge.

[Some older studies](#) have reported that bilingual children acquire language more slowly and have smaller vocabularies than their monolingual peers.

However, these studies neglected variables such as schooling and

parental socioeconomic status, both of which heavily influence language outcomes, confounding the interpretation of the results.

[Studies](#) with children matched on these variables have largely found comparable results in language abilities for bilinguals and monolinguals.

Identifying language learning problems

Different groups of bilingual children differ in their initial difficulties in learning English. Bilinguals whose first language has sound structures that are similar to English (such as Spanish) tend to acquire the sounds and structure of English faster than children coming from a Mandarin-speaking background, where the sounds and structure are very different.

However, approximately 7% of monolingual children experience some form of [language delay](#), even though they have no other hearing, cognitive or neurological problems.

This later language development, also known as "specific language impairment" (SLI), results in children's slower learning of certain aspects of language. This then raises the question of how to identify language impairment in bilingual children.

How do we tell the difference between a bilingual child who is simply slower in their development of English because they are not getting enough input at home and a child with a fundamental problem with [language learning](#) in general?

This is an issue that concerns many Australians, especially because the diagnosis for language delay and subsequent intervention are only made in English, and tend to occur only once the child has enrolled in school.

This has enormous implications for the child, the parents and the

educational system; it is [well documented](#) that targeted early intervention is very important for children with SLI.

However, little is known about how to identify language delay in children growing up bilingually. For this we need more studies of early bilingualism – before children reach school – to better understand the process of bilingual development and what typical bilingual language acquisition looks like.

This can then be used to inform parents, clinicians and educators about the normal course of bilingual language development, and identify those few [bilingual children](#) who are at risk of SLI. This is a small subset of a growing bilingual population in Australia.

Many new Australians have no choice but to speak to their [children](#) in their native [language](#). While learning English is essential, connections to familial backgrounds are also important. Happily, in addition to the cultural advantages, being bilingual appears to be good for the brain.

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