

Raising Bilingual Children: Advantages, Challenges and Strategies for Success

By A/P Leher Singh, Associate Professor, Department of Psychology;

Infant and Child Language Centre; CFPR Research Associate, NUS

As featured on Lianhe Zaobao, 7 May 2017

Raising children to speak two languages can endow a child with several advantages from a very early age. Babies, children and adults who speak two languages are better able to multi-task, to filter out distracting information when doing a task, to learn new information, and to think more flexibly about situations, people and problems. Even in their twilight years, elderly adults who speak two languages demonstrate healthier aging in the brain, suggesting that bilingualism can act as a 'preservative' for the aging brain.

Studies at the NUS Infant and Child Language Centre focus on how children's development changes on account of learning two languages. Our focus is on developing a better understanding of how bilingualism influences early child development. Our recent research findings demonstrate, for example, that children who are raised to speak English and Mandarin can show better knowledge of Mandarin tones in comparison to children learning Mandarin alone. These advantages were evident as early as 12 to 13 months, right when children begin to produce their first word. Secondly, bilingual English-Mandarin and monolingual Mandarin toddlers at 2 years of age show similar abilities to quickly recognize vocabulary items in Mandarin. This adds to past research showing that learning two languages does not limit how well a child will learn one language. Finally, bilingual infants at 18 months may be better positioned to learn new languages, even if they bear little relation to a child's native languages. In a recent study, we taught bilingual English-Mandarin babies and English monolingual babies words in a South African language, Ndebele, which they had never heard. However, within a few minutes of training, bilingual infants were able to learn words in far-off Ndebele whereas monolingual toddlers were not. This suggests that learning two languages may endow children with greater linguistic flexibility and open their systems up to learning additional languages.

Even though bilingualism presents children with language learning and cognitive advantages, raising a bilingual child is not always easy. Here are some common questions raised by parents of bilingual children and some answers provided by research studies on bilingualism.

Firstly, is it better to wait until children have learned one language to add a second? Will children get confused? There is a lot of evidence to suggest that early exposure is best. The newborn infant is not a monolingual at birth and the human brain is just as good at learning two languages as it is at learning one. Children do not get confused on account of learning two languages any more than they get confused by learning one. For example, it is very common for monolingual English learning toddlers to confuse 'he' and 'she' even if they are just learning English. Likewise, bilingual toddlers sometimes show 'intrusion' errors, where they borrow from one language when using the other (e.g. pass me the 'bao'). However, these errors usually self correct over time and do not signify a language delay or confusion.

Secondly, does bilingualism cause a language delay? No, bilingualism does not predispose a child to speech or language or any other developmental delays. Research suggests that growth in each language will initially be slower in bilingual children as bilingual children hear less of each language. For example, if 2 year-old Ben is only learning English and 2 year-old John is learning English and Mandarin, it is highly possible that John will have fewer words in English than Ben as a toddler. This is because John's vocabulary is distributed over two languages. This does not mean that John has a language delay. However, if vocabulary is calculated in both languages, research suggests that John's vocabulary size is likely to be equal to or greater than that of Ben. This does mean that we should resist comparing 2-year-old Ben and John in English and instead focus on whether both children fall within the normal range. If at all, comparisons should be made factoring in vocabulary in all of the child's languages. Early differences in single language vocabulary should not cause alarm; they are a part of the early bilingual journey.

Lastly, to learn two languages, do children need to hear one language from each parent to avoid becoming confused? Although the one-parent/one-language (OPOL) strategy is popular, there is little research to promote this as advantageous. Large scale research studies reveal no advantage associated with OPOL families over families where both parents speak both languages, and families where one language is spoken at home and the other at school. What matters more is that children receive equal and balanced exposure to both languages. OPOL can be a good strategy to equalize exposure to each language if both parents engage equally with their children. Other strategies include using one language exclusively at home and one at school, or alternating languages by days of the week.

Parents often wonder how they can help their children to become bilingual. Here are some research-based suggestions to promote childhood bilingualism. First, start early. Children who learn two languages between birth and 3 years of age are called 'crib' bilinguals. Crib bilinguals are more likely to learn both languages to native levels than those who learn one language and add a second later in childhood. While late acquisition of two languages is possible, this is heavily influenced by a child's propensity for language learning and motivation.

Secondly, try and be consistent. Children benefit from sustained bilingual exposure, not a 'crash course' one month before the grandparents visit. Children who hear daily exposure to both languages fare better with bilingualism than those with intermittent concentrated exposure to a second language.

Third, be patient and persevere. Children often demonstrate a preference for one language, and this preference is usually for the language of the peer environment. It is important for children to continue to speak in both languages: 'active bilinguals' do better in acquiring both languages than 'receptive bilinguals' who understand both languages, but only speak in one. However, it is very typical for children to prefer one language and even to refuse to speak in a second language, placing the onus on parents to enliven the child's interest in both languages. It is helpful to create situations where both languages are useful and relevant for the child (e.g. through valued family bonds, friendship groups, language clubs), such that he/she speaks both languages on a regular basis. In other words, try to build a bilingual world for your child.

Fourth, try to ensure each language is equally engaging. Children who learn one language exclusively from friends, family and peers and the other exclusively from textbooks are unlikely to be equally engaged in each language. It is important for children to appreciate the relevance of each language in their lives, such that both languages are 'living languages' in their world. Bilingualism is best viewed as a family commitment. Children who hear both languages spoken by different people do better than children who, for example, only speak a mother tongue with one person. Family and community engagement in both languages can promote bilingualism.