

LEARNING LANGUAGE OPPORTUNITIES FOR BILINGUAL CHILDREN

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Abstract: in this article we have reviewed what the science says about six of parents' most commonly asked questions about early bilingualism. Research demonstrates that we need to reshape our views of early bilingualism: children are born ready to learn the language or languages of their environments without confusion or delay. To promote successful bilingual development, parents raising bilingual children should ensure that their children have ample opportunities to hear and speak both of their languages. As children get older, interacting with monolingual speakers (especially other children) is important for motivating ongoing language use, especially for minority languages not widely spoken in the community. Teachers, pediatricians, and speech language pathologists play an important role in dispelling common myths, and in communicating science-based information about early bilingualism to parents. While our focus here has been on language development, it is also important to recognize that early childhood is also a time of profound emotional, social, physical, and cognitive development. Bilingualism will be a priority or even a necessity for some families. Other families might choose to focus on other aspects of development. In some cases, where families are not fluent in a second language, early bilingualism might be unrealistic. Here, it is important to keep two things in mind: 1) bilingualism is only one way to promote successful early development, and 2) second language learning is possible at any age. Language—any language—is a window to the world. It is better for parents to provide plenty of input and interaction in a language they are comfortable in, than to hold back because they are not fluent or comfortable in the language.

When it comes to raising bilingual children, myths and misunderstandings are common, but facts are hard to come by. Together with researchers around the world, we are working hard to continue providing scientifically based facts addressing parents' most important questions about early bilingualism.

Keywords: bilingual children, monolingual children, bilingualism, conceptual.

ВОЗМОЖНОСТИ ИЗУЧЕНИЯ ЯЗЫКА ДЛЯ ДВУЯЗЫЧНЫХ ДЕТЕЙ

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Аннотация: в этой статье мы рассмотрели, что говорит наука о наиболее часто задаваемых вопросах родителями о раннем двуязычии. Исследования показывают, что нам нужно изменить наши взгляды на раннее двуязычие: дети рождаются, чтобы изучать язык или языки своей среды без путаницы или задержки. Для продвижения успешного двуязычного развития родители, воспитывающие двуязычных детей должны обеспечить, чтобы у них детей были широкие возможности слышать и говорить на обоих своих языках. По мере взросления детей взаимодействие с одноязычными ораторами (особенно другими детьми) важно для мотивации постоянного использования языка, особенно для языков меньшинств, которые не широко распространены в сообществе. Учителя педиатры и речевые языковые патологи играют важную роль в рассеивании распространенных мифов и в передаче научной информации о раннем двуязычии родителям. В то время как наше внимание здесь сосредоточено на развитии языка, важно также признать, что раннее детство также является временем глубокого эмоционального, социального, физического и когнитивного развития. Другие семьи не владеют вторым языком, раннее двуязычие может быть нереалистичным. Здесь важно иметь в виду две вещи: 1) Двуязычие – это только один из способов продвижения успешного раннего развития, и 2) обучение в других странах возможно в любом языке – это окно в мир. Родителям лучше обеспечить достаточный вклад и взаимодействие на языке, который им удобен на языке. Когда дело доходит до воспитания двуязычных детей, мифы и непонимание являются общими, но факты трудно найти. Исследователями по всему миру прилагаются все усилия, чтобы продолжать предоставлять научно-обоснованные факты, касающиеся родителей, наиболее важные вопросы о раннем двуязычии.

Ключевые слова: двуязычные дети, одноязычные дети, билингвизм, концептуальный.

Bilingual children are *not* more likely than monolingual children to have difficulties with language, to show delays in learning, or to be diagnosed with a language disorder [1]. Parents' perceptions are often otherwise—they feel that their child is behind due to their bilingualism—revealing an interesting disconnect from scientific

findings. Science has revealed an important property of early bilingual children's language knowledge that might explain this misperception: while bilingual children typically know fewer words in each of their languages than do monolingual learners of those languages, this apparent difference disappears when you calculate bilingual children's "conceptual vocabulary" across both languages[2]. That is, if you add together known words in each language, and then make sure you don't double-count cross-language synonyms (e.g., dog and *perro*), then bilingual children know approximately the same number of words as monolingual children [3].

As an example, if a Spanish/English bilingual toddler knows 50 Spanish words and 50 English words, she will probably not appear to be as good at communicating when compared to her monolingual cousin who knows 90 English words. However, assuming 10 of the toddler's Spanish words are also known in English, then the toddler has a conceptual vocabulary of 90 words, which matches that of her cousin. Even so, knowing 50 vs. 90 English words could result in noticeably different communication abilities, but these differences are likely to become less noticeable with time. This hypothetical example about equivalence in vocabulary is supported by research showing that bilingual and monolingual 14-month-olds are equally good at learning word-object associations [4]. This offers some reassurance that young bilinguals—like young monolinguals—possess learning skills that can successfully get them started on expected vocabulary trajectories. There is also evidence that bilingual children match monolinguals in conversational abilities; for example, when somebody uses a confusing or mispronounced word, or says something ambiguous, bilingual children can repair the conversation with the same skill as monolinguals [5]. Just like some monolingual children have a language delay or disorder, a similar proportion of bilinguals will have a language delay or disorder. Evidence that *one* bilingual child has a language difficulty, however, is not evidence that bilingualism leads to language difficulties in general. The challenge for pediatricians and for speech-language pathologists is to decide if a bilingual child does have a problem, or whether her errors are part of normal development and interaction between the sounds, words, and grammars of her two languages. If parents are worried that their bilingual child does have a delay, they should first consult their pediatrician. Pediatricians sometimes have a tendency to say, "Don't worry, her language is completely normal." This statement will end up being false for some children who will end up diagnosed with language difficulties, but it is more likely than not to be true, especially considering that parents can be inaccurate when estimating their bilingual child's language skills. In some other cases, health care providers with concerns about language impairment may recommend against raising a child in a bilingual environment. This recommendation is not supported by the science of bilingualism. Bilingual children with specific language impairments [6], Down syndrome [7], and autism spectrum disorders [8] are not more likely to experience additional delays or challenges compared to monolingual children with these impairments. If parents do not feel comfortable with a pediatrician's opinion, they should find (or ask for a referral to) a speech-language pathologist with expertise in bilingualism, if at all possible. Early intervention increases the likelihood of a positive outcome. The problem is that few clinicians receive quality training about the learning needs of bilingual children, which in some cases leads to a misdiagnosis of bilingual children as having delayed or disordered language [9] [10]. The time is past due to eliminate such simple misunderstandings in clinical settings. A bilingual clinician, or an individual who has training in bilingualism, will take care in assessing language skills in both languages, in order to measure the child's entire language profile. Parents should keep in mind that clinicians have a very difficult job when it comes to assessing bilingual children. They have to accurately assess a bilingual child's language abilities in each of her languages, integrate the child's problematic and unproblematic abilities in terms of sounds, words, grammar, and conversation in each language into a coherent whole, evaluate whether the child is delayed and/or disordered in one or both languages, weigh the child's linguistic/cognitive capacities in comparison to typically and atypically developing monolingual children and, when possible, bilingual children of the same age, and develop an effective intervention that targets subareas of linguistic/cognitive competence in one and/or both languages. This is a tangled landscape for intervention, but one that can be assessed thoughtfully. Regardless of whether parents pursue intervention, they can help children gain bilingual proficiency by using both languages as regularly as possible in enriching and engaging contexts. Furthermore, parents should keep in mind that both monolingual and bilingual children can best show off their skills when using language that matches their daily experiences [11]. In summary, if you measure bilinguals using a monolingual measure, you are more likely to find false evidence of delay. Fortunately, researchers and clinicians are now developing bilingual-specific measures that paint a more accurate picture of bilinguals' global language competence.

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