

Raising Bilingual Children: Common Parental Concerns and Current Research

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The purpose of this digest is to help pediatricians, speech language pathologists, classroom teachers, and other professionals who work with bilingual children and their parents understand common parental concerns related to bilingual childrearing and become familiar with the current science on bilingual child development. Greater insight into both issues will allow these professionals to provide more effective and scientifically sound advice to parents.

A growing number of U.S. parents view bilingualism as a laudable family goal. The reasons for this trend include a desire to maintain ties to the parents' heritage language and culture, to provide children with academic and cognitive advantages, and to promote cross-cultural understanding and communication. Yet research indicates that success in raising children to be bilingual remains the exception in the United States, as most children eventually become English dominant or even monolingual in English (Wong Fillmore, 2000). This is due at least in part to the high status of English and the limited number of opportunities available for children to learn languages other than English. Research also indicates that parents' beliefs, attitudes, and interactions with their children are important in helping children become bilingual (De Houwer, 1998; Lanza, 1997).

In order to better inform early childhood professionals, who can play a key role in shaping parents' beliefs and behaviors, we conducted individual in-depth interviews with 24 economically and culturally diverse families in Washington, DC, all of whom aimed to raise their children (then ages 0 to 5) as Spanish-English bilinguals (King & Fogle, in press). Here we summarize, in four key points, the findings of our investigation in light of the current research literature on bilingual development:

- Although many parents believe that bilingualism results in language delay, research suggests that monolingual and bilingual children meet major language developmental milestones at similar times.
- Despite many parents' fear that using two languages will result in confusion for their children, there is no research evidence to support this. On the contrary, use of two languages in the same conversation has been found to be a sign of mastery of both languages.
- Many parents rely heavily on television to teach the second language; yet this is best considered a fun source of secondary support for language learning. Human interaction is the best method for fostering language learning.
- Contrary to the widespread notion among parents that bilingualism results in "bigger, better brains," parents more realistically can expect their bilingual children to gain specific advantages in targeted areas, such as greater understanding of language as an abstract system.

Bilingualism and Language Delay

Many of the parents we interviewed believed that their children had experienced or were likely to experience language delay as a result of their dual language environment. The same

view is prevalent in the popular parenting literature. Such sources frequently note that acquisition of two languages can result in "language delay," though many also suggest that the long-term benefits of bilingualism are important (e.g., Fabian, 2003; Foreman, 2002; Murkoff, 2003; Pruett, n.d.).

It is important to differentiate between the popular use of the term *language delay* in reference to a child who is perceived to take longer than average to begin to speak but who is well within the normal range of productive vocabulary development (Fenson et al., 1994) and the clinical use of the term to refer to significant delays in the development of language, which can be either primary (not associated with another disorder) or secondary (associated with conditions such as autism). A lack of understanding of the different uses of the term may result in undue concern for some parents interested in raising their children with two languages.

Terminology issues aside, the research is quite clear: No empirical evidence links bilingualism to language delay of any sort. As De Houwer (1999) summarizes, "There is no scientific evidence to date that hearing two or more languages leads to delays or disorders in language acquisition. Many, many children throughout the world grow up with two or more languages from infancy without showing any signs of language delays or disorder" (p. 1). Likewise, Petitto and Holowka's (2002) extensive literature review leads them to argue that "very early simultaneous language exposure does *not* cause a young child to be delayed with respect to the semantic and conceptual underpinnings at the heart of all natural language, and this is true regarding *each* of the young bilingual's two native languages" (p. 23).

Bilingualism and Language Confusion

Many of the parents interviewed worried that their children would experience confusion due to exposure to two languages. Some believed that language delay was the result of this confusion. Several advice publications (e.g., Eisenberg, Murkoff, & Hathaway, 1989; Honig, n.d.) suggest that confusion could be avoided by using the one-parent, one-language approach to bilingual childrearing, in which each caregiver uses only one language with the child and parents refrain from using two languages in the same conversation.

However, research indicates that the ability to switch back and forth between languages, sometimes called *code-switching*, is a sign of mastery of two linguistic systems, not a sign of language confusion, and that children as young as 2 are able to code-switch in socially appropriate ways (Lanza, 1992). Research also shows that many normally developing bilingual children mix their two languages, with the type and amount of code-switching depending on environmental factors, such as how much the parents or wider community engage in code-switching.

As to the effectiveness of the one-parent, one-language approach, there is evidence that it can lead to the development of children's active competence in two languages, but it can also result in passive bilingualism (Döpke, 1992; Yamamoto, 1995), in which children understand both languages but speak only the majority language (i.e., the high status language of the wider community). This approach is one option for raising bilingual children, but parents do not need to fear language confusion if they opt for another approach, such as using only the minority language in the home or using both languages in the same contexts. Parents instead should be encouraged to think about the total quantity and quality of exposure to both languages that their children receive.

Language Learning and Television

Many parents we interviewed relied heavily on commercial language materials such as books, videos, television programs, and music CDs to help their children learn a second language. Likewise, much of the popular press and advice literature stresses the value of books and videos, often providing long lists of language learning television and video programs (Eisenberg et al., 1989; Langley, 1999; Lichtenberger, n.d.).

Yet research clearly indicates that some activities are more effective than others in promoting second language acquisition and bilingualism. In particular, we know a growing amount about the limits of television and video as instructional aides with young children. For instance, recent studies have examined the process of *perceptual narrowing* in infants, that is, infants' gradual loss of the ability to perceive sounds unlike those in the language(s) to which they are regularly exposed. Researchers have found that live interaction (e.g., reading or talking to a child) is more effective than exposure to recorded sounds (e.g., television) in reversing the narrowing process (Kuhl, Feng-Ming, & Huei-Mei, 2003). Other studies have found that, for older children, being read aloud to in the second language increases second language vocabulary much more than watching television in that language (Patterson, 2002). In short, while audio and video materials can serve as a positive and entertaining source of support for language learning, human interaction is the best method for fostering both first and second language development.

Bilingualism and Intelligence

None of the parents in our survey feared any negative impact of bilingualism on their children's intelligence. In fact, many felt that their children would benefit cognitively from being bilingual. However, both parents and the popular press overstate the known cognitive advantages of bilingualism, noting, for instance, that bilingualism will make children smarter overall, when in fact, research suggests advantages only in very specific areas.

For instance, while our knowledge is far from complete, leading researchers (e.g., Bialystok, 2001) have been careful to identify the benefits of bilingualism in specific areas such as metalinguistic awareness (awareness about language as a system) and cognitive processing. They note that other factors, such as the child's level of mastery of each language and the child's literacy skills, also influence the benefits derived from being bilingual. Therefore bilingualism may contribute to the strengthening of some specific cognitive skills for some children, but it should not be viewed as an overall indicator of greater intelligence or as a predictor of high academic performance.

Summary

In responding to parents' questions or concerns about raising bilingual children, professionals should warmly encourage the use of two languages in the home. We know that parents' use of their first language is important in providing children a rich linguistic environment (Snow, 1990) as well as in promoting bilingualism, which can become an important resource for the child, family, and wider community. Parents should be directed to practical resources such as *The Bilingual Family Newsletter* (www.bilingualfamilynewsletter.com) and the *Why, How, and When Should My Child Learn a Second Language?* brochure (www.cal.org/resources/brochures/whyhowwhen_brochure.pdf). Perhaps most importantly, parents should be encouraged to be aware of the quantity and quality of their children's

exposure to both languages and to think about creating a "safe space" for the minority language to flourish at home.

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