

Autism and Bilingualism

What We Found

Bilingualism does not negatively impact autistic people, and may provide benefits for cognitive and socio-emotional development.

Over a series of studies, we consistently found that bilingualism does not delay the development of thinking skills in autistic children [1]. This includes the ability to keep information in mind, resist distractions and habits [2], and switch between tasks [3]. Bilingualism could even advantage autistic children in one or more of these abilities, though our studies were too small to be sure about this.

In addition, our research with autistic adults found that learning two languages in early childhood can improve autistic people's social skills, especially the ability to process other people's thoughts and points of view [4]. Many told us that that bilingualism increased their self-esteem, helped them to better understand themselves and opened doors to leisure, education, and professional opportunities [5].

Finally, we consulted with practitioners and educators about common barriers to supporting bilingual families with autistic children [6].

What We Suggest

Bilingualism can be viewed as a valuable tool that can enrich and facilitate cultural, social, and overall lived experiences for autistic people. It is crucial that autistic people are provided with equal access to language learning, and are appropriately supported in doing so.

Parents should be supported to raise their autistic child bilingually if they wish. This may be especially important if other members of the family are already bilingual, or only speak a minority language [7]. Autistic children need to be able to communicate with those around them - even if they are not speaking, they need to understand the words being spoken. Parents should not abruptly change the languages they are using if their child gets an autism diagnosis.

Practitioners should not advise parents to "stick" to the majority language (i.e. English) just because their child is autistic. Cultural Diversity training and resources in the child's other language, would help practitioners support autistic children from bilingual families.

Autistic children and young people should be given the opportunity to learn additional languages at school. Their diagnosis does not mean they cannot learn another language, and it may become a source of enjoyment or opportunity. Others may not be keen language learners, and that is OK. Teachers need to be sensitive to the information processing needs of autistic children learning languages in school.

When it comes to languages, as far as possible autistic children should have the same opportunities as non-autistic children.

What We Did

We conducted three main studies working with autistic children and adults, in the UK and overseas. Our data come from a huge range of language and cultural environments.

Why We did It

Teachers, clinicians, speech & language therapists, and parents have all cited lack of information as a problem when trying to make decisions about bilingualism for autistic children

Thank you

This research could not have happened without the generosity of all the people who took part.

This policy briefing draws on three multi-part studies.

1. We examined the impact of being exposed to two or more languages in a group of bilingual autistic (and non-autistic) children from across the UK. Children had experience of a wide variety of languages. We examined relations between the languages they heard and their attention profile
2. We recruited bilingual and monolingual autistic children in the United Arab Emirates and investigated differences in their thinking skills. We collected data directly from the children, but also captured their parents' and their teachers' perceptions of those same skills too.
3. We recruited a large international group of bilingual (and multi-lingual) autistic adults. They completed a detailed online survey about their language knowledge and social quality of life, and some also took part in face-to-face assessments of their ability to take the point of view of another person.

It is estimated that at least half the world's population is bilingual – which means half of autistic people are bilingual too.

There are concerns that being exposed to two languages at home or school could be detrimental for autistic children's cognitive and language development. As a result, bilingual parents, practitioners, and educators frequently report favouring monolingual environments for autistic children. These children could be missing out.

We wanted to address professionals' and parents concerns, including:

1. uncertainties as to whether they are providing the right advice
2. worries about the limited resources and interventions available for autistic children in languages other than English
3. concerns that bilingualism could be confusing for autistic children

- 1- Sharaan, S. (2020). *Bilingualism meets autism: An investigation of executive function profiles in English-Arabic children* (Doctoral dissertation, University of Edinburgh, Edinburgh).
- 2- Sharaan, S., Fletcher-Watson, S., & MacPherson, S.E. (2020). The impact of bilingualism on the executive functions of autistic children: A study of English-Arabic children. *Autism Research*. <https://doi.org/10.1002/aur.2439>
- 3- Montgomery, L., Chondrogianni, V., Fletcher-Watson, S., Rabagliati, H., Sorace, A., & Davis, R. (2021). Measuring the Impact of Bilingualism on Executive Functioning Via Inhibitory Control Abilities in Autistic Children. Preprint: <https://doi.org/10.31219/osf.io/x72ne>
- 4- Digard, B. G. (2020). *Bilingualism in autism: A neurocognitive investigation of the influence of bilingualism on perspective-taking in autistic adults* (Doctoral dissertation, University of Edinburgh, Edinburgh). <http://dx.doi.org/10.7488/era/843>
- 5- Nolte, K., Fletcher-Watson, S., Sorace, A., Stanfield, A., & Digard, B.G. (2021). Perspectives and experiences of autistic multilingual adults: A qualitative analysis. *Autism in adulthood* (in press) <https://doi.org/10.31219/osf.io/7kn9c>
- 6- Hampton, S., Rabagliati, H., Sorace, A., & Fletcher-Watson, S. (2017). Autism and bilingualism: A qualitative interview study of parents' perspectives and experiences. *Journal of Speech, Language, and Hearing Research*, 60(2), 435-446.
- 7- Davis, R., Mohammed, F. B., & Sargent L. (2020) Practitioner perspectives towards autism and bilingualism on socio-cultural factors and family experiences.

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