

Bilingualism and Autism Spectrum Disorder: What the Research Tells Us

Will a bilingual environment hinder my child's language development?

No! Although this concern has been shared by parents and professionals, research does not support the idea that speaking more than one language in the home is harmful for children with ASD. ¹ In fact, research from the UW Autism Center shows that bilingualism may actually provide benefits for children with ASD! It is important to remember that language development itself may occur at a similar pace between monolingual and bilingual children with ASD.²



How bilingual environments can support children with ASD:

- Better perspective taking – an important tool for social communication ⁵
- Greater use of gestures to signify wants and needs ⁵
- More advanced skills in pretend play⁵
- More cooing and vocalizing in toddlers⁵
- Caretakers interacting in their native language may be able to be more responsive, use an increased variety of communication functions, convey more nuanced emotions, and expand on topics of interest; which can lead to better language modeling from the caretaker to the child ⁶
- Children have the opportunity to interact with family members who speak other languages, participate fully in family gatherings and benefit from enriched cultural identities.
- Better able to switch attention between two tasks than monolingual peers with ASD (i.e. Sorting objects by color, then switching to sort by shape)⁷

In comparison to children with ASD who speak one language, exposure to bilingual environments does **NOT**:

- Lower the child's ability to understand or use spoken language^{1,4}
- Cause additional language delays⁵
- Decrease cognitive ability
- Increase symptoms of ASD³

Resource websites for families:

- www.autism-society.org
- <https://www.autismspeaks.org/>
- <https://theautismblog.seattlechildrens.org/autism-and-bilingual-children/>



Best Practices for Bilingual Families

- **Use familiar language:** Using the language you are most comfortable with will help model speech and language use. If you are worried that switching languages will confuse a child developing language, focus on what comes naturally to you. This will provide the most natural language modeling and you will be more likely to promote conversation with your child! Remember that any language is better than no language.
- **Use simple language:** Use language that your child will understand so they can build connections between words used in their everyday life.
- **Honor requests in both languages:** When your child communicates with you, respond to them, regardless of what language they use. This will encourage your child to keep communicating with you.
- **Slow it down:** If you speak at a slower pace, children will have an easier time understanding.
- **Expand language through modeling:** If your child uses 1-2 word phrases, model longer sentences by restating what they say and adding one or two words more. For example, if dad pulls into the driveway and your child says “Daddy!”, you could expand this by saying “Daddy is home” or “Daddy drove home!”
- **Use Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC):** AAC systems can be very helpful for children with ASD, especially for those who are nonverbal. You can use picture communication boards, schedule books, and various other types of supports to encourage your child to communicate their needs to you. Use of AAC does *not* hinder speech development but instead helps teach the ways and reasons we communicate. These can be made to support in multiple languages.
- **Read with your child:** Reading books together in multiple languages can improve vocabulary as well as develop reading skills.
- **Play language-rich games:** Good examples of games that practice giving and receiving information via language include Simon Says, Mad Libs, and Story Cubes. Letter games such as Boggle and Banagrams can help with vocabulary and awareness of different parts of a word.

If you have concerns about your child’s language abilities, seek out an evaluation with a speech language pathologist to determine if your child has a language delay/disorder.



Resources

- 1) 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) 435-446. doi:10.1044/2016_JSLHR-L-15-0348
- 2) Zhou, V., Munson, J., Greenson, J., Hou, Y., Rogers, S., & Estes, A. (2017). An exploratory longitudinal study of social and language outcomes in children with Autism in bilingual home environments. *Autism*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1362361317743251>.
- 3) Angulo-Jiménez, H. (2018). Bilingualism and Autism: Addressing parents’ frequently asked questions. *Perspectives of the ASHA Special Interest Groups*, 3(2), 98-105.
- 4) Reetzke, R., Zou, X., Sheng, L., & Katsos, N. (2015). Communicative development in bilingually exposed Chinese children with Autism Spectrum Disorders. *Journal of Speech, Language, and Hearing Research*, 53(3), 813-25. doi: 10.1044/2015_JSLHR-L-13-0258.
- 5) Valicenti-McDermott, M., Tarshis, N., & Schouls, M. (2012). Language differences between monolingual English and bilingual English-Spanish young children with Autism Spectrum Disorders. *Journal of Child Neurology*, 28(7), 945-948. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0883073812453204>
- 6) Kremer-Sadilk, T. (2005). To be or not to be bilingual: autistic children from multilingual families. In: Cohen J, McAlister KT, Rolstad K, et al., (eds) *Proceedings of the 4th International Symposium on Bilingualism*. Somerville, MA: Cascadilla Press, pp. 1225-1234.
- 7) Gonzalez-Barrero, A. M. and Nadig, A. S. (2017), Can Bilingualism Mitigate Set-Shifting Difficulties in Children With Autism Spectrum Disorders? *Child Dev*. doi:10.1111/cdev.12979