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## Bilingualism in autism

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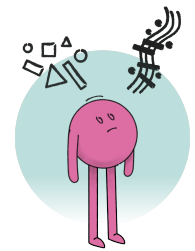
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## Bilingualism in Autism: Evidence and Recommendations for Education Practice

Bilingualism does not negatively impact autistic people and may provide benefits for cognitive and socio-emotional development. It is an essential part of someone's identity.

Information flyer for families (PDF, freely available): <https://autism-bilingualism.github.io/resources/>

**Autism** is a lifelong neurodevelopmental condition, and at least 1 in 100 people are autistic. There is debate regarding the language used when describing autism. Here we use identity-first language (e.g., "autistic person") as opposed to person-first language (e.g., "person with autism") to respect the preference of the majority of autistic people<sup>1,2</sup>.

**Bilingualism** is the knowledge of more than one language, signed or spoken, regardless of ability levels and the age at which a language is learnt. It is estimated that at least half the world's population is bilingual.

### Does bilingualism have negative effects for autistic people?

Research suggests that bilingualism does not cause delays for autistic children's development, and it could have a positive influence on their cognitive, cultural, and social development. However, despite the opportunities that can arise from bilingualism, parents still often remain concerned about the so-called "harmful effects" of bilingualism and incorrectly believe that a monolingual environment would be better for autistic children<sup>3</sup>.

- **Bilingualism does not cause additional difficulties in language development** for autistic children<sup>4</sup>. While research shows that bilingual children can unintentionally mix languages or have smaller vocabularies early in childhood, this is also typical for most non-autistic bilingual children but does not influence developmental milestones or language skills later in childhood<sup>5</sup>.
- **Bilingualism does not delay the development of thinking skills** in autistic children, including general **executive skills**<sup>6</sup>. Evidence from both western and non-western populations suggests that bilingualism could help autistic children in some of these skills, possibly in a long-lasting way<sup>7</sup>.
- **Bilingualism can help with the development of autistic people's social and social-cognitive skills**<sup>8</sup> especially the ability to understand other people's point of view<sup>7</sup>.
- **Bilingualism can shape autistic people's daily life**, it can help with their **self-esteem**, help them to **better understand themselves**, and access leisure, education, and professional **opportunities**<sup>9</sup>.

**Bilingualism and Identity:** Research shows that understanding the language shared with one's family and community is an essential part of a person's identity. Bilingualism helps autistic people **connect with their identity, family, and communities** worldwide<sup>7</sup>. Being acknowledged and supported as a bilingual and bicultural autistic person is not just about language, it is also about **being seen, being recognised, and belonging**. Being able to connect to our cultural, community and identity through language is a **fundamental human right**, for autistic people as for everybody else<sup>10</sup>.

**For children who don't use many words:** There is **little to no research available on the experiences of minimally speaking, non-speaking autistic children** or children with learning differences. The research available suggests that being exposed to several languages does not delay autistic children's development, regardless of the quantity of language they produce. Importantly, "not speaking" does not mean "not understanding". Minimally verbal and non-speaking autistic children from bilingual families have the fundamental human right to connect with their community through the languages they understand.

**What we recommend:** Bilingualism enriches 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 supported in doing so. Recommending parents to raise their child monolingually should not be done lightly: the languages the child can and cannot understand will impact their future and the functioning of their family. As such, monolingualism should be chosen as the exception rather than the rule, when it is the best solution for the child. **Providing parents with a science-led evidence base** will enable them to make informed decisions with their child about their language environment.

**Educational support for autistic bilingual people:** The **role of educators is crucial** in bilingual families' decisions to maintain bilingualism with their autistic child<sup>11</sup>. It is important for educators supporting the child to prioritise the home languages, which will facilitate the child's access to language and culture<sup>12</sup>.

- It is crucial that educators reach a **better understanding of autism, bilingualism, and biculturalism** thanks to bespoke training, whether they have a diagnosed autistic pupil and bilingual pupils in their classroom or not. Autism-related information are available through the [National Autistic Society](#) and the [Autism Education Trust](#).
- **Local authorities around the UK can provide interpreters** when needed. Schools should check what the provisions are in their locality, and if needed, get involved in the movement to develop this support.
- When supporting autistic bilingual pupils, educators should value the children's **cultural identity growth** as much as their academic learning.
- Schools should encourage all autistic pupils to **participate in additional language learning**. Pupils are taught languages at school in part because it can bring countless opportunities. Ensuring autistic pupils can participate in language classes will allow them to choose for themselves whether they wish to pursue this learning or not.

Being aware of these issues and limitations will help educators, researchers, and families work together to strive towards better support for autistic bilingual children and young people.

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**Additional resources:**

- Reference list: <https://osf.io/ursny/>
- Information flyer for families (PDF, freely available): <https://autism-bilingualism.github.io/resources/>
- Video recording of a 90 min long webinar for educators: <http://edin.ac/2Zukk5u>
- Podcast: Much Language Such Talk, S1 E13, Bilingualism & Autism – Bérengère Digard & Sonny Hallett: <https://edin.ac/3Ma2JTV>
- Information leaflet for clinical practice: <https://osf.io/uyzkg/>
- Autism-related teaching information: [National Autistic Society](#) and the [Autism Education Trust](#)
- Bilingualism-related teaching information: [NALDIC](#), [EEF](#) and [Bilingualism Matters](#)

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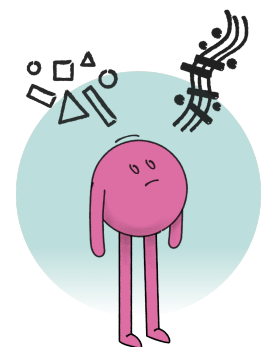
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**Feedback & Evaluation:**

Link: <https://edin.ac/3tyEIUC>

Or feel free to email us at [autism@ed.ac.uk](mailto:autism@ed.ac.uk).



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