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Can children with language impairments learn two languages?

By Lauren Lowry

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HIGHLIGHTS OF THE ARTICLE

Children with language impairments can successfully learn two languages without experiencing additional delays beyond those seen in monolingual children with similar difficulties.

Research shows this is true for both simultaneous bilinguals, who learn two languages from a young age, and sequential bilinguals, who learn a second language after the first is established.

It is widely accepted that parents should be encouraged to use their home language when communicating with their children, as a strong foundation in a child's first language can benefit second-language acquisition.

Professionals working with these children should also support the family's home language. Whether learning one language or two, children with language impairment need extra support with language learning.

Normally). Some research has also looked at bilingual children with Down syndrome and more recently, Autism. This body of research has looked at two types of bilingual children:

- **simultaneous bilinguals:** children who acquire two languages before the age of three
- **sequential bilinguals:** children who learn a second language after the first language is well-established (generally after the age of three).

Another distinction drawn in the literature about childhood bilingualism and language impairment is the influence of the type of language a child is exposed to:

- **majority language** refers to the language spoken by the majority of people in a region
- **minority language** refers to a language spoken by a minority of the population

A final term which is useful when thinking about research on bilingualism is **monolingual**:

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Parents of children with language impairments sometimes wonder about the impact of a second language on their child. They may ask questions like:

- *My child has been exposed to two languages since birth. Will this make my child's language delay even worse?"*
- *"Can I introduce a second language to my child? He already has a delay in his first language."*
- *"Should I stop speaking my home language to my child?"*
- *"Would a French immersion program be too difficult for my child?"*

New research is emerging about children with a variety of language difficulties who are exposed to more than one language. Most of the research has been conducted with children with "Specific Language Impairment" (SLI), who have difficulties with language, but no other developmental difficulties (for example, motor skills, cognitive/thinking skills, and social skills are all developing normally). Some research has also looked at bilingual children with Down Syndrome and more recently, Autism. This body of research has looked at two types of bilingual children:

- **simultaneous bilinguals:** children who acquire two languages before the age of three
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Another distinction drawn in the literature about childhood bilingualism and language impairment is the influence of the type of language a child is exposed to:

- **majority language** refers to the language spoken by the majority of people in a region
- **minority language** refers to a language spoken by a minority of the population

A final term which is useful when thinking about research on bilingualism is **monolingual**:

- **monolingual** is an individual who only speaks one language

Studies about bilingual children with language impairments compare bilingual children and monolingual children with similar language impairments. These comparisons allow us to see if the addition of an extra language causes any differences or extra burden for the child.

Now let's look at some common questions parents ask about the impact of a bilingual environment on their child with language difficulties, and what the research tells us.

“My child has been exposed to two languages since birth. Will this make my child's language delay even worse?”

This type of bilingual child is a “simultaneous” learner, learning both languages from a young age. Sometimes parents worry that bilingualism will cause extra delays for children with language impairment, or that becoming bilingual is not possible for this group of children. Researchers have looked at the following groups of simultaneous bilingual children:

- **Children with Specific Language Impairment (SLI)**

Young children with SLI learning two languages at the same time do not demonstrate any greater difficulties in their two languages, as compared to monolingual children with SLI [1]. Simultaneous bilingual children with SLI demonstrate the same challenges as monolingual children with SLI, but not any extra burden or difficulties [2,3].

- **Children with Down Syndrome**

A study comparing children with Down Syndrome being raised in bilingual homes with monolingual children with Down syndrome found that the bilingual children performed at least as well as the monolingual children with Down Syndrome (in their dominant language or language of greater exposure) [4]. Therefore, negative effects of bilingualism were not found.

- **Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)**

The vocabularies of English-Chinese bilingual children with ASD and monolingual children with ASD were compared in a study [5]. The authors concluded that bilingualism did not have a negative effect on the children's language development, as both groups had similar vocabulary scores.

The Bottom Line...

To date, studies regarding simultaneous bilingual children with a variety of language difficulties show that these children **do not have any extra delay or difficulties** than monolingual children with similar language difficulties.

“Can I introduce a second language to my child? He already has a delay in his first language.”

This type of bilingual child is a “sequential” learner. He has learned his first language, and will be introduced to a second language after the age of three. The following groups of children have been studied:

- **Children with SLI**

Most studies have shown that children with SLI who learn a second language catch up to their monolingual peers with SLI after sufficient exposure to the second language [6]. These children follow a similar developmental path and achieve similar levels of language proficiency as monolingual children with SLI.

However, Dutch researchers found different results. Minority (Turkish) language children with SLI who learned Dutch as a second language lagged behind their monolingual peers with SLI, even after four years of exposure to Dutch [6]. It has been suggested though that these results could be due to the fact that children who come from isolated, socioeconomically disadvantaged minority groups may be at a disadvantage when it comes to learning a second language [1]. In the studies mentioned above with positive outcomes, children lived in environments in which both of their languages had high status and support (such as Canadian children learning French and English, two official languages). Therefore, this may promote successful second language learning in this group of children.

- **Children with ASD**

A recent study in 2011 compared the language skills of sequential, simultaneous, and monolingual children with ASD [7]. This study included nonverbal and verbal children. Significant differences between the language levels of these three groups of children were not found.

The Bottom Line...

The research that has been conducted to date shows that **sequential bilingual children with language impairments can learn a second language**, although there seems to be an advantage for children whose languages are both highly supported in their community and school. Sequential bilingual children with language impairments face language-learning challenges, but not greater than monolingual children with the same language impairment.

Should I stop speaking my home language to my child?

Sometimes when parents find out that their child has a language delay, they feel they should stop speaking their home language to their child. Parents considering this usually feel that their child has to learn the majority language, but that their home language is not a necessity in the community. Some parents consider switching to the majority language because they themselves speak the majority language of the community. Others parents however, wonder if they should stop

speaking their home language, even if they are not fluent or comfortable in the majority language themselves.

There are several problems that can arise when parents decide to stop speaking their home language with their child:

- if parents try to speak a language with which they are not comfortable, it can jeopardize parent-child connection and interaction. This can lead to great emotional and psychological difficulties for the parents and the child, as language is strongly linked to emotion, affect, and identity [8].
- children who speak a minority language are at risk for incomplete learning or loss of their home language [1]. This can affect how well that child learns a second language, as a strong foundation in the home language benefits second language learning.
- a child's links to his home culture can be compromised [9].
- there may be family members who only speak the home language. If a child loses his ability to speak the home language, relationships with these family members can suffer [9].

The importance of maintaining the child's skills in his home language is emphasized in an article by Dr. Kathryn Kohnert and her colleagues, who explain that [10]:

- children with language impairment and their parents should share a common language so that they can communicate a wide variety of family values, experiences, care and concern.
- a major goal of therapy for young bilingual children with language impairment should be helping the child's skills in the child's home language.

The Bottom Line...

It is widely accepted that **parents should be encouraged to communicate with their children in their home language**, and that professionals working with the child should support the family's home language [10].

“Would a French immersion program be too difficult for my child?”

Despite the prevalence of immersion programs, there is very little research concerning the suitability of children with language impairment for these programs. One study in 1982 looked at the performance of English students with language impairment in French immersion programs [11]. These students performed at a similar level as their monolingual peers with language impairment in English-only schools. Furthermore, the children in immersion had significantly superior French skills compared to students both with and without language impairment who were receiving conventional French instruction in English schools [6].

The Bottom Line...

Children with language impairment are frequently directed towards monolingual school options [12]. However, the research to date (albeit limited) indicates that **children with language difficulties may do just as well in bilingual education settings** as in monolingual settings. Whether learning one language or two, children with language impairment need extra support with language learning. When considering an immersion program, it is important to inquire about the availability of speech-language services and special education available to the child at school [6], to support not only the language of immersion, but also the child's first language.

Final Thoughts

Many children with language delay are raised in bilingual environments. While many people have falsely believed that bilingualism is detrimental to children with language difficulties, the above research shows that bilingualism is possible for this group of children. As summarized by Dr. Fred Genesee, a researcher in the area of bilingualism:

"Evidence on children with specific language impairment, admittedly rather limited at this time, suggests that...these children can acquire functional competence in two languages at the same time, within the limits of their impairment. Therefore, children with specific language impairment living in families where knowing two, or more, languages are useful and important, should be given every opportunity to acquire two languages" (13, p.14-15).

Dr. Genesee goes on to explain that:

"bilingual children need continuous and regular exposure to both languages to ensure their complete acquisition" (13, p.15)

and that:

"special consideration should be given to minority languages. It is advisable to provide more exposure to minority than majority languages in the home to offset the lack of exposure to these languages in the community..." (13, p. 15).

If your child has a language impairment and is exposed to more than one language, consult a speech-language pathologist about the best ways to help your child. Your child will need help learning both of his languages. Like all bilingual children, your child will need constant, rich exposure to both languages in order to become bilingual. Beware of old-fashioned advice to stop speaking your home language, as this opinion is not supported by research. Rather, a strong foundation in a child's home language has been found to help a child learn a second language.

Endnotes

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About The Hanen Centre

Founded in 1975, The Hanen Centre is a Canadian not-for-profit charitable organization with a global reach. Its mission is to provide parents, caregivers, early childhood educators and speech-language pathologists with the knowledge and training they need to help young children develop the best possible language, social and literacy skills. This includes children who have or are at risk for language delays, those with developmental challenges such as autism, and those who are developing typically.

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