

# The advantages of bilingualism

Figures suggest that more than 70% of the world's population live with two or more languages. Despite that, many parents, educators and child care professionals believe that learning one language is normal, but that learning two languages could be a burden and put children at risk of delayed speech and language development. This isn't true.

There are many benefits to bilingualism, particularly when a child is using both language regularly:

- Meta-linguistic awareness - bilingualism builds a natural awareness of how language works
- Cognitive flexibility - choosing between languages can develop a flexibility of thinking that can be applied to other problem solving areas
- Social sensitivity – are more tolerant and show sensitivity to others from a young age
- They can be more creative

Parents must support their child learn their family's different languages so that the child can fully function within their family. Also, because language is an integral part of cultural identity, "minority language children risk becoming alienated if they do not learn the home language."

Parents and child care providers should understand that if they want infants and toddlers to benefit from knowing two languages, they should be committed to raising children bilingually. Start dual language learning as early as possible because infants and toddlers are particularly adept at learning languages.

Research shows that bilingual children go through the same basic milestones in language acquisition at the same rate as children who learn only one language. But they need to be given adequate learning environments. Bilingual children begin to babble at the same age as monolingual children. They say their first words at the same age and start to produce multiword sentences at the same age as well.

Many people assume that infants and toddlers can become confused by exposure to two languages. As long as most people around them, family or childcare provider, use one language at a time, the child will learn that this is the appropriate way to use the two languages. Research has shown that most bilingual children keep their languages separate most of the time. When they mix language, it is often to fill gaps in their vocabulary. Mixing languages does not mean that children are confused or impaired; they are simply using all of their language they have to hand.

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The research of Fred Genesee from McGill University

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