



Bilingualism in Young Children: Separating Fact From Fiction

By Lauren Lowry

Hanen Certified Speech-Language Pathologist and Hanen Staff Member

Note: “bilingual” refers to someone who speaks two languages; “monolingual” refers to someone who speaks one language

The Facts: What We Know About Bilingualism

Our world is becoming increasingly multilingual. Consider some of the following statistics:

In Canada....

- 11.9 % of the population speaks a language other than English or French at home (1). In Toronto, 31% of the population speaks a language other than English or French at home (2).

In the United States....

- 21% of school-age children (between ages 5-17) speak a language other than English at home (3). This number is projected to increase in the coming years (4).

Worldwide, it is estimated that....

- there are more second language speakers of English than native speakers (5).
- there are as many bilingual children as there are monolingual children (10).

These trends mean that many children are being raised as bilinguals. Sometimes bilingualism is a necessity, as a child’s parents may not be fluent in the majority (dominant) language spoken in the community. Therefore, the child may learn one language at home and another at school. But sometimes bilingualism is a choice, and parents may wish to expose their child to another language, even if they do not speak a second language themselves. This could be due to the many benefits of being bilingual.

Benefits of Bilingualism

- Bilingual children are better able to focus their attention on relevant information and ignore distractions (7, 8). For more information, [click here](#) for our article “Are Two Languages Better Than One?”.
- Bilingual individuals have been shown to be more creative and better at planning and solving complex problems than monolinguals (9, 10).

- The effects of aging on the brain are diminished among bilingual adults (7).
- In one study, the onset of dementia was delayed by 4 years in bilinguals compared to monolinguals with dementia (10).
- Bilingual individuals have greater access to people and resources (9).
- In Canada, employment rates are higher for French/English bilinguals than monolinguals (7).
- Canadians who speak both official languages have a median income nearly 10% higher than that of those who speak English only, and 40% higher than that of those who speak French only (7).

The cognitive advantages of bilingualism (e.g. with attention, problem solving, etc.) seem to be related to an individual's proficiency in his languages (10). This means that a person will benefit more from his bilingualism (cognitively) if he is more proficient in his languages.

How Children Learn More Than One Language

Bilingual acquisition can take place in one of two ways:

1. **Simultaneous Acquisition** occurs when a child is raised bilingually from birth, or when the second language is introduced before the age of three (10). Children learning two languages simultaneously go through the same developmental stages as children learning one language. While bilingual children may start talking slightly later than monolingual children, they still begin talking within the normal range (11). From the very beginning of language learning, simultaneous bilinguals seem to acquire two separate languages (10). Early on, they are able to differentiate their two languages and have been shown to switch languages according to their conversation partner (e.g. speak French to a French-speaking parent, then switch to English with an English-speaking parent) (12, 13).
2. **Sequential Acquisition** occurs when a second language is introduced after the first language is well-established (generally after the age of three). Children may experience sequential acquisition if they immigrate to a country where a different language is spoken. Sequential learning may also occur if the child exclusively speaks his heritage language at home until he begins school, where instruction is offered in a different language.

A child who acquires a second language in this manner generally experiences the following (10):

- initially, he may **use his home language** for a brief period.
- he may **go through a "Silent" or "Nonverbal" Period** when he is first exposed to a second language. This can last from a few weeks to several months, and is most likely a time when the child builds his understanding of the language (14). Younger children usually remain in this phase longer than older children. Children may rely on using gestures in this period, and use few words in the second language.
- he will begin to **use short or imitative sentences**. The child may use one-word labels or memorized phrases such as "I dunno" or "What's this?". These sentences are not constructed from the child's own vocabulary or knowledge of the language. Rather, they are phrases he has heard and memorized.
- eventually, he will **begin to produce his own sentences**. These sentences are not entirely memorized, and incorporate some of the child's own newly-learned vocabulary. The child may use a "formula" at first when constructing sentences and insert his own word into a common phrase such as "I want..." or "I do....". Eventually the child becomes more and more fluent, but continues to make grammatical mistakes or produce sentences that sound abbreviated because he is missing some grammatical rules (e.g. "I no want eat apple" instead of "I don't want to eat an apple"). Some of the mistakes a child makes at this stage are due to the influence of his first language. But many of the mistakes are the same types of mistakes that monolingual children make when they learn that language.

Fiction: Some Myths about Bilingualism

#1. Bilingualism causes language delay.

FALSE. While a bilingual child's vocabulary in each individual language may be smaller than average, his total vocabulary (from both languages) will be at least the same size as a monolingual child (10, 15). Bilingual children may say their first words slightly later than monolingual children, but still within the normal age range (between 8-15 months) (11). And when bilingual children start to produce short sentences, they develop grammar along the same patterns and timelines as children learning one language (5). Bilingualism itself does not cause language delay (10). A bilingual child who is demonstrating significant delays in language milestones could have a language disorder and should be seen by a speech language pathologist.

#2. When children mix their languages it means that they are confused and having trouble becoming bilingual.

FALSE. When children use both languages within the same sentence or conversation, it is known as "code mixing" or "code switching". Examples of English-French code-mixing: "big *bobo*" ("bruise" or "cut"), or "*je veux aller manger tomato*" ("*I want to go eat.*") (10). Parents sometimes worry that this mixing is a sign of language delay or confusion. However, code mixing is a natural part of bilingualism (17). Proficient adult bilinguals code mix when they converse with other bilinguals, and it should be expected that bilingual children will code-mix when speaking with other bilinguals (5).

Many researchers see code mixing as a sign of bilingual proficiency. For example, bilingual children adjust the amount of code-mixing they use to match that of a new conversational partner (someone they've never met before who also code mixes) (5). It has also been suggested that children code-mix when they know a word in one language but not the other (13). Furthermore, sometimes code-mixing is used to emphasize something, express emotion, or to highlight what someone else said in the other language. For example, "*Y luego él dijo STOP*" (Spanish mixed with English: "And then he said STOP!") (10). Therefore, code-mixing is natural and should be expected in bilingual children.

#3. A person is not truly bilingual unless he is equally proficient in both languages.

FALSE. It is rare to find an individual who is equally proficient in both languages (16). Most bilinguals have a "dominant language", a language of greater proficiency. The dominant language is often influenced by the majority language of the society in which the individual lives (6). An individual's dominant language can change with age, circumstance, education, social network, employment, and many other factors (16).

#4. An individual must learn a second language as a young child in order to become bilingual.

FALSE. There is a "Critical Period" theory that suggests that there is a window of time (early childhood) during which a second language is most easily learned. This theory has led many people to believe that it is better to learn a second language as a young child. Young children have been found to achieve better native-like pronunciation than older children or adult second language learners. And they seem to achieve better long-term grammatical skills than older learners (10). But other findings have called the idea of a critical period into question. For example:

- older children (in middle elementary school) have been shown to have advantages when learning "academic" English. "Academic" language refers to the specialized vocabulary, grammar, and conversational ability needed to understand and learn in school (10). This is likely easier for older children because they learn their second language with more advanced cognitive skills than younger children, and with more experience with schooling and literacy (10).

- older children and adults seem to be advantaged when initially learning vocabulary and grammar (10, 16, 18).

Therefore, while younger children seem to become more “native-like” in the long-term, older children may pick up vocabulary, grammar, and academic language more easily in the initial stages of language learning.

#5. Parents should adopt the “one parent-one language” approach when exposing their child to two languages.

FALSE. Some parents may choose to adopt the “one parent-one language” approach, where each parent speaks a different language to the child. While this is one option for raising a bilingual child, there is no evidence to suggest that it is the only or best way to raise a child bilingually, or that it reduces code mixing (10). Parents should not worry if they both speak their native language to the child or if they mix languages with their child (19), as it has been recognized that children will mix their languages regardless of the parents’ approach (10). Many approaches can lead to bilingualism. Parents should speak to their child in a way that is comfortable and natural to them.

#6. If you want your child to speak the majority language, you should stop speaking your home language with your child.

FALSE. Some parents attempt to speak the majority language to their child because they want their child to learn that language, even if they themselves are not fluent in the majority language. This can mean that conversations and interactions do not feel natural or comfortable between parent and child. There is no evidence that frequent use of the second language in the home is essential for a child to learn a second language (10). Furthermore, without knowledge of a family’s home language, a child can become isolated from family members who only speak the home language. Research shows that children who have a strong foundation in their home language more easily learn a second language. Children are also at great risk of losing their home language if it is not supported continually at home.

How to Support your Bilingual Child

There are many ways to support your child’s bilingualism:

- Do what feels comfortable for you and your family. Don’t try to speak a language with your child if you are not comfortable or fluent in that language
- Don’t worry if your child mixes his two languages. This is a normal part of becoming bilingual. Provide your child with many opportunities to hear, speak, play, and interact in your home language.
- If you think your child has a language delay, consult a speech language pathologist for advice regarding the best ways to help your child learn more than one language.

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