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Communication and the Bilingual Child

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Across the United States, the number of children who speak more than one language is increasing rapidly. The following tips can help you in teaching the bilingual child.



What you need to know:

- Children learning two or more languages may need more time to start talking and to develop overall expressive language skills. Yet, the end result is an understanding on one's culture, improved self-esteem, a greater sense of community, and possibly more complex thinking skills (Rosenberg, 2002).
- The earlier you expose your child to both languages, the easier it is for him/her to pick up each language while achieving a native accent. The longer you wait, the harder it will be for the child to become fluent.
- Rather than suddenly immersing your child in a second language, try to slowly introduce new routines to your child. The next section has some suggestions.

Other points to keep in mind:

- **Give plenty of opportunities.** The more a child is exposed to a language, the better he/she will become at using and understanding it. For example, if more time is spent using English (vs. Chinese), you can bet that the child will become more fluent in English. So, make sure to balance both languages.
- **Slow down.** Try not to talk so fast. This doesn't just apply to parents of bilingual children. Kids will have a much easier time picking up what they hear if you speak at a slower pace.
- **Keep it Simple.** Use language that your child can understand. If he/she is using 1-2 words at a time (e.g., "cookie!"), try modeling a slightly longer 2-3 word sentence (e.g., "Want cookie?" or "Cookie please."). Also, model words that will be useful in his/her everyday life.
- **Story time.** Read books in each language to help your child develop reading skills while building vocabulary, sentence structure, phonemic awareness, and learning about the related culture.

Bilingual Evaluations:

Here are some general guidelines for therapists, which will vary depending on the individual. Parents, remember that your Speech-Language Pathologist (SLP) will provide answers specific to your child and his/her evaluation results.



The child exhibits a...

- Delay in only one language. In this case, the child has been exposed to one language more than the other(s) and, therefore, is more fluent in that language. Such a child does not require speech-language services, but just needs to hear and practice the second language more often in his/her daily environment.
- Mild delay in both languages. If the delay centers around vocabulary, he/she may not qualify for services either. In other words, the therapist may assume that the delay is typical of a second language learner.

Significant delay in both languages. This may indicate a need for intervention. A child may be diagnosed as having a language disorder if he/she demonstrates difficulty in learning any language, not just a secondary language.

Still Concerned?

Parents concerned about their child's speech and language development should not hesitate to contact an SLP. A resource for finding an SLP is the American Speech, Language, and Hearing Association's (ASHA) website, <http://www.asha.org/proserv/>. The SLP can determine whether or not a true language delay exists. It is preferable, but not necessary, to find bilingual therapists. Again, such individuals may not be available in your area. As long as a monolingual (one language) Speech Pathologist works with an interpreter for the evaluation, he/she will be able to gain an accurate picture of the child's skill level in both languages. The interpreter should be familiar with the dialect spoken by the family. Otherwise, test results could be misleading.

Families need to make informed decisions about whether or not to expose their child(ren) to bilingualism. Understanding all the advantages of multi-language learning may aid us in shaping the future of our children.

References:

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