



LET'S TALK

...FOR PEOPLE WITH SPECIAL COMMUNICATION NEEDS

Children and Bilingualism

According to the 2000 U.S. Census, 46.9 million people 5 years of age and older speak a language other than English at home. Demographic profiles are rapidly changing across the country, especially in the number of bilingual individuals. In the past, second generation children were encouraged to adopt the customs, culture, and language of what was identified as the majority culture. Today, there is greater acceptance and celebration of cultural differences. Families are now encouraged not only to maintain their cultural identity, but to pass it on to their children. This is also the case with language; families are encouraged to maintain the use of their native language while their children learn a second language.



When a child does not actively practice using one of the languages, he or she may lose the ability to communicate in that language.

What is Bilingualism?

Bilingualism is the ability to communicate in two languages. Some bilingual children know both languages very well and can use them to communicate at home, at school, or in the community. However, many bilingual children have what is known as a dominant

language, the language that they know better and feel more comfortable using most of the time. This dominant language sometimes changes over time.

How do I Teach my Child to be Bilingual?

Some people use two languages with their child from the time they are born; this is called simultaneous bilingualism. Usually one parent/caregiver uses one language and the other parent/caregiver uses a different language. Another way is to use only one language with your child at home. When the child begins school, a second language will be introduced while the first language will continue to be used at home; this is known as sequential bilingualism. Both methods can be quite effective, however, it is important to remember to provide a number of experiences where the child can hear and practice using both languages in meaningful contexts.

Children can be expected to go through periods of mixing grammar rules between the two languages and borrowing vocabulary to express ideas within the same sentence. Some children may go through what is known as a "silent" or "nonverbal" period where they do not communicate as much when a second language is introduced. All of these experiences are normal and should gradually disappear as their language skills develop. Learning two languages may take a little longer than learning just one language, but most bilingual children will still use their first words at one year and begin using two-word combinations at two years old.

When a child does not actively practice using one of the languages, he or she may lose the ability to communicate in that language. Every child has a unique bilingual experience. Using both languages well depends on the amount of time spent communicating in each language and the kinds of experiences the child has at home, at school, and in the community.



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Will Using Two Languages Cause Speech or Language Problems?

No, learning two languages will not cause speech or language problems. Many children around the world grow up learning more than one language and do not develop speech or language problems. In cases where children appear to be having problems communicating, parents should feel comfortable communicating with their child in the language that they are most comfortable using, even if it is different from the language used at that child's day-care or school. Sudden changes in a child's language environment could

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cause unnecessary emotional stress.

Parents who are concerned about their child's speech or language development should contact a bilingual ASHA-certified speech-language pathologist. If one is not available, a speech-language pathologist may seek assistance from a professional interpreter when testing a bilingual child. A speech-language evaluation can help to identify any problems with a child's speech and language development in both languages.



Go to ASHA's website at www.asha.org for information and referrals or call 800-638-8255.



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