Assessment of Bilingual Children with Autism and Other Developmental Disabilities: *Update and Recommendations for Parents and Professionals*

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Objectives

Participants will

• Gain knowledge about research findings related to bilingual language development in young children with autism and other developmental disabilities;

• Learn about the factors to consider when assessing a bilingual child;

• Learn how to support families in maintaining the home language for children with and without developmental disabilities.
Myths and Facts About Bilingualism
Myth 1: Bilingual Children’s Language Will be Delayed
• Classic study showed that language milestones are the same for bilingual and monolingual children
  – 25 Spanish-English bilinguals and 35 from monolingual homes
  – Language milestones were tracked from ages age 8 to 30 months
  – Combining vocabulary in both languages, bilinguals had same vocabulary as monolinguals

If a bilingual child is not reaching typical milestones—seek help! It’s not because he or she is being exposed to 2 languages.
Myth 2: Children are Confused by Exposure to Two Languages
Facts

• Some children may show cross-linguistic influence: rules from the more dominant language may get applied incorrectly in the less dominant language
  – This is a typical part of bilingual language development

• Children are good at figuring out when/with whom they should use which language

• Code-switching/code mixing is not a sign of confusion
Children feel confused when their parents change their language use

- Parent stops speaking in the home language to the child after concern about language delay is raised
- Family members stop conversation when child comes in the room to avoid exposing him to the “wrong” language
Myth 3: Children with Developmental Delays or Autism Spectrum Disorders Will Have More Delays if Exposed to Two Languages
Facts: Bilingual Language Development in Children with DD/ASD

• Studies have compared children with disabilities from monolingual and bilingual homes to determine if there is a difference in language acquisition

• Important to test children in their dominant language or in both languages if bilingual
Children with Down Syndrome

• Study of children with Down Syndrome being raised in bilingual (English-French) vs monolingual homes in Canada

• Ages 2 ½ to 8 years

• No difference in language abilities for the two groups—bilingual children had equally developed skills as monolingual children

Children with Autism Spectrum Disorders

• Study of children with ASD from bilingual (n = 45) and monolingual (n = 30) environments
• Ages 3 to 6 ½ years
• No differences in language skills between the two groups

Children with Specific Language Impairment (SLI)

- Studies of bilingual and monolingual children with SLI
- No differences in grammatical morphology (such as use of verb tenses) between the two groups
- Children with SLI were able to become bilingual when a second language was added

Based on research by Paradis and colleagues (French-English bilingual children) and by Gutierrez-Clellen and colleagues (Spanish-English bilingual children)
Celebrate Bilingualism
Benefits of Bilingualism

• If children are exposed to two languages from an early age and become proficient in both, advantages are found, such as:
  – Metalinguistic awareness, which is linked to reading/writing skill
  – Executive control functions (because they have learned selective attention and inhibition)
  – Later onset of dementia in older adulthood

Based on research by Bialystok at York University in Toronto
Benefits of Bilingualism

Personal benefits:

• Access to more people, literature, travel, employment opportunity, connecting with different cultures
Assessment of Bilingual Young Children
Collaboration with Interpreters

• Before and after the session: prepare & debrief
  – Learn greetings; pronunciation of names
  – Prepare for intentional silences
  – Prepare for discussion of difficult topics
  – Debrief re interpreter impressions

• During the session: connect with family
  – Describe interpreter role
  – Speak directly to family member
  – Use short, concise sentences
Determining Language to Use

• Caregiver questionnaire/interviews

• Observe in different settings

• Language samples in all exposed languages
Test Selection and Administration

DO:

• When possible select tests:
  – Translated appropriately (International Test Commission guidelines)
  – Normed on children from similar language background
  – Including representative standardization sample
  – Examples for Spanish-speaking young children:

• Consider use of a nonverbal or language reduced assessment if no appropriate verbal test available (e.g. Leiter - 3)
Test Selection and Administration

Do (continued)

• Incorporate Authentic Assessment principles
• Ask parents to observe the child during testing and to tell you how typical the performance was of their usual behavior/functioning
• Select naturalistic alternatives to supplement standardized testing
Test Selection and Administration

DON’T:

• Don’t informally translate “on the fly”
• Don’t use an interpreter for a standardized cognitive, language, or other structured test
• Don’t assume a test was translated appropriately or normed on non-English speaking children
Interpreting Results

DO:
- Interpret test results with caution, considering norms and standardization sample
- Compare results from different assessments
- Combine both languages

DON’T:
- Don’t assume a test is “nonverbal” based on title
- Don’t assume norms are applicable because test instructions translated
- Don’t assume language delays are due to being raised bilingually; bilingual children on average have same language milestones as monolingual
Humans Need Humans
The live human presence is critical to language learning

- Attention and arousal = motivation
- Live humans combine speech with eye gaze
- Joint attention
- Reciprocal interactions
Adults are Language Models

• Parents and caregivers provide a more rich language model when speaking their home language

• People using their home language speak with more heightened affect/emotion which stimulates children’s learning
Home Language Contains Culture
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• Language is the medium for children to learn about the values, beliefs, and norms of their family culture
• Parent-child attachment is linked to language and communication
• Language connects children to extended family members
• Loss of home language especially likely when the home language is a minority language in the culture
Supporting the Home Language in Children with Delays & Disabilities

• Encourage parents to speak to their children in the language in which they are most comfortable—even if the child has delays

• Work with providers/therapists on ways to support communication in the home
Recommendations for Parents

• Option 1: Use the language that you are most comfortable in at home. Your child can learn the second language when he or she starts school.

• Option 2: Use two languages from the start. If there are people living in the home who speak different languages, your child can be exposed to more than one language and will learn to distinguish them.
Recommendations for Parents

• Give your child many opportunities to hear and practice using both languages in everyday situations.
• Tell stories and sign songs; share books
• Talk about your traditions and cultures
• Make sure interactions in home language are varied and fun, and not just giving instructions
• American Speech-Language-Hearing Association website: www.asha.org
  – The Advantages of Being Bilingual
  – Teaching Your Child Two Languages
  – Becoming Bilingual/El Nino Bilingue

Resources

• Head Start materials: The Importance of Home Language series
  https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/culture-language/article/importance-home-language-series

Bilingualism: Frequently Asked Questions
www.literacytrust.org.uk

• Center for Applied Linguistics

Comments? Questions?

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