

Bilingual Children and Speech Therapy: Nurturing Language Skills in Multilingual Families

Many children grow up exposed to two or more languages. While this has the potential to enrich the child's life and expand the number of ways in which they are able to express themselves, there is also the risk that these children will lag behind in one of the languages and never hit their speech and language development milestones. Parents of these children have questions about the cost of speech therapy for kids by an early intervention specialist. They want to know the benefits of bilingualism and how to support their children's language acquisition.

Bilingualism is common and on the rise in many areas of the world. Typical contact regions between two languages include Canada in North America, Senegal and South Africa in Africa, India and the Philippines in Asia, and Switzerland and Belgium in Europe. In the U.S., many bilinguals live in New Mexico, Arizona, New York, Florida, Texas, and California. By 2035, the expectation of kids speaking a language other than English enrolled in kindergarten [in California](#) is more than 50 percent. In urban areas of Canada like Toronto, as many as 50 percent of students have a native language that is not English.

Bilingual parents express their desire to raise dynamic, proficient bilingual children. There are mixed reviews in the press about whether it is positive or negative to raise kids in a bilingual household. Some early intervention specialists recommend against exposing kids to two languages. However, the stance against early bilingualism often comes from misinterpretations and myths instead of scientific findings. There is research into bilingualism that comes from a variety of sources including communication sciences and disorders, linguistics, education, cognitive psychology, and developmental psychology.

Some of these [research studies](#) provide partial answers to parents' most pressing questions about early bilingualism and speech therapy for kids by an early intervention specialist. Six of the most common questions that parents, speech-language pathologists, pediatricians, elementary teachers, and preschool teachers have about early bilingual development appear below.

Are Bilingual Children Confused?

Among the most significant concerns parents have about raising kids in a bilingual household is possible confusion. Bilingual adults speak the language they choose at any time without confusion, but what about infants and children who are bilingual? One misunderstood behavior is children mixing words from different languages in the same sentence.

The term for this practice is code-mixing. It is a normal part of developing bilingual abilities. There are reasons bilingual kids code mix. They mimic what they hear adults do. Like young monolinguals, they sometimes need more linguistic resources.

Like a one-year-old using the word 'dog' for all four-legged animals, bilingual kids also use limited vocabulary resourcefully. If an appropriate word is unknown or a child cannot retrieve it quickly, they sometimes borrow a word from another language.

Rather than a sign of confusion, code-mixing is the path of least resistance and demonstrates a child's ingenuity. Their use of two languages is not haphazard. Children as young as two years old demonstrate some ability to attune their language based on the language used by conversational partners.

[Research](#) shows that early code-mixing complies with predictable grammar-like rules, similar to those governing adults' code-mixing. The research into bilingual infants is also telling. They show no confusion and readily distinguish two languages. Languages differ in dimensions. People recognize the difference between Mandarin and Russian without speaking the languages.

Infants are sensitive to the differences and are attuned to the rhythm of the languages. They discriminate between languages that are dissimilar in rhythm, such as French and English, at birth, and similar languages, such as Spanish and French, at four months. At eight months, bilinguals remain sensitive to the distinctions. In contrast, monolinguals tend to pay less attention to subtle facial movement variations.

Are Bilingual Children Smarter?

Articles like [The Power of the Bilingual Brain](#) and books like *The Bilingual Edge* tout the benefits of children who know multiple languages. They have an edge in traveling, employment, speaking with their extended families, maintaining a connection to family history and culture, and making friends with people from different backgrounds.

Some [studies](#) suggest bilinguals show advantages in social understanding. They navigate a complex world where people have a different knowledge of language. Bilingual preschoolers have better skills in understanding the intentions, desires, thoughts, and perspectives of others.

Young bilingual kids have enhanced sensitivity to communication features like tone of voice. Bilinguals show some cognitive advantages. They perform better on tasks involving switching activities and interfering with previously learned responses.

The study of advantages mainly involves adults and children. [New evidence](#) suggests bilingual infants also show cognitive benefits. They have memory advantages, such as generalizing information from one event to another. The reasons behind the advantages are not perfectly clear to early intervention specialists.

There are several possibilities. Bilingual adults must switch back and forth between languages and inhibit one while speaking another. Researchers suspect the practice trains the brain, which leads to certain advantages. The need to discriminate between two languages may play a role

in infants.

Bilingualism is not the only experience linked to cognitive benefits. People with early musical training show multiple enriched experiences that promote cognitive development. The use of highly sensitive laboratory-based methods demonstrated the bilingual advantages; whether bilingualism plays a role in everyday life is unknown. The reported benefits do not imply that bilingualism is essential for successful development.

Should Each Person Speak One Language With a Child Who is Bilingual?

One-person-one-language is a popular strategy. An early intervention specialist 100 years ago reasoned that associating each language with a different person was the way to prevent bilingual kids from intellectual fatigue and confusion. As stated above, that notion is incorrect.

There must be more than a one-person-one language approach for successful bilingual acquisition. Infants learn language through interacting and listening to different speakers. They need exposure to the sounds, words, and grammar of the languages they learn.

Quantity and quality matter. Exposure involves social interaction. There is a link between opportunities to interact with multiple speakers and vocabulary learning in bilingual toddlers. The number of words a child hears in a day profoundly affects their language development.

Hearing more words provides a greater opportunity to learn the language, leading to advantages in school performance as they age. Bilingual children need a quantity of exposure to each language. The languages influence each other, but they travel independent developmental paths.

When they hear a large amount of a language, they learn more of its words and grammar and demonstrate more efficient processing. Bilingual parents need to ensure their children have sufficient exposure to the language their children are learning.

Balanced exposure to two languages is apt to promote the successful acquisition of both. One-parent-one-language is an excellent way to ensure equal exposure when each parent spends equal time with a child. Exposure to a second language only when relatives visit, a part-time nanny visits, or during a language class is not balanced exposure.

Balanced exposure is not necessarily a guarantee of later bilingualism. As children get older, they are more aware of the language spoken in the community and use it at school. The language used most often is the majority language. Other languages are minority languages.

An early intervention specialist recommends providing more early [minority language input](#), like giving opportunities to play with other children using the language as speech therapy for kids. There are fewer challenges in communities like Miami, Montreal, and Barcelona, which are largely bilingual.

The best speech therapy for kids promotes high quantity and high-quality exposure to each child's language. Possible structured approaches include hiring an early intervention specialist, using different languages as a function of person, place, or time, meaning one-person-one-language, one language at home, and another outside, and alternating days of the week or mornings and afternoons.

Some parents speak only one language with a child. Others find flexible use of two languages, with no rules, to be the best speech therapy for kids. It leads to positive interactions and balanced exposure. The family should consider every family member's language proficiency, language preference, and community situation. Parents need to regularly objectively appraise what a child hears daily and adjust language when necessary.

Code-mixing has social implications. It is a part of being bilingual in some communities. Examples where code-mixing is the norm include some U.S. Spanish-English communities and Afrikaans-English in South Africa. Exposure to the code-mixing patterns and rules as speech therapy for kids is an excellent approach.

Is Learning Early Better?

An early intervention specialist works on the premise found in [research](#) that tells us our brains are more receptive to language early in life. The environment at that time is also more conducive to language learning. Caregivers speak in a manner that is neither too complex nor too simple.

Speech therapy for kids includes children receiving engaging, diverse, and rich opportunities to learn the components that make up their native language. Simultaneous bilinguals are those who learn two languages from birth. Those who learn one language followed by another are sequential bilinguals.

Evidence points to simultaneous bilinguals' higher proficiency, more diverse vocabulary, and better accents. There are other ways to foster bilingual development for children not exposed to each language from birth. Hiring an early intervention specialist for speech therapy for kids is one possibility. It results in increased bilingual proficiency. Opportunities for continued learning and use are essential as children get older. Proficiency is not an expectation without opportunities to learn and use a language.

Are Bilingual Children More Susceptible to Language Disorders, Delays, or Difficulties?

Bilingual kids are not more susceptible to language disorders, delays, or difficulties than monolingual children. Parents sometimes have the perception that their children are behind because of bilingualism. They feel this way because bilingual children usually know fewer words in each language than monolingual learners.

The combined known words of the two languages are approximately the same as those of monolingual children. An early intervention specialist knowledgeable about speech therapy for kids helps. If there is a problem, early intervention increases the chance of a positive outcome.

An early intervention specialist from PenguinSmart offers support and facilitates the early intervention process. Speech therapy for kids who are bilingual begins with the early intervention specialist assessing the child's skills in both languages.

An early intervention specialist has a challenging job in assessing bilingual children to determine the best speech therapy for kids. It involves

- Assessing the child's ability in each language
- Integrating problematic and unproblematic abilities regarding sounds, words, grammar, and conversation
- Weighing the child's linguistic and cognitive capacity compared to typical and atypical development of monolingual children
- Developing the proper speech therapy for kids who are bilingual

Conclusion

While the focus is on language development, an early intervention specialist recognizes that early childhood is also a time of cognitive, physical, social, and emotional development. Bilingualism is a priority or a necessity for some families. Others choose to focus on other developmental aspects.

For families not fluent in a second language, speech therapy for kids is not realistic. Significant things to consider are 1) bilingualism is only one way of promoting successful early development, and 2) learning a second language is possible at any age.

Misunderstandings and myths are common when raising bilingual children; facts are only sometimes available. At PenguinSmart, an early intervention specialist works on scientific facts based on research from around the world to provide speech therapy for kids that addresses the above questions. Learn more about PenguinSmart [here](#).

About PenguinSmart

Founded by Harvard & MIT alumni, PenguinSmart combines the latest data sciences with expert insights to empower parents to become a key part of their children's development journey. By helping families effectively integrate communication techniques into daily life, we see children show faster improvement compared to relying on weekly clinical sessions alone (in some cases 2-3x faster). We have already served English & Mandarin-speaking families from over 35 cities around the world. PenguinSmart is an Alchemist Accelerator-backed company

and was nominated for the IFAH global "Top 100 Healthcare Visionaries" award.

Our Core Service

[Customized Parent Coaching](#) - a comprehensive 12-15 weeks family coaching program that involves customized training plans for how parents engage the child at home to stimulate communication development; caregiver training, 1:1 consultations with SLP and coaching team, on-demand online assistant support and personal progress tracking platform.