



Bilingual Language Development and Disorders
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Hello and welcome! My name is Leah Fabiano-Smith. I am an assistant professor in the Department of Speech, Language, and Hearing Sciences at the University of Arizona and a certified bilingual speech-language pathologist. This parent training module will focus on “Bilingual Language Development and Disorders.” In this session, you will learn what to expect during bilingual language development and will gain an understanding of the distinction between language disorder and language difference.

This module will cover the following topics. First, I’ll briefly discuss the term “bilingualism” and how children become bilingual. Next, I’ll address some common concerns about raising a child bilingual. Lastly, I’ll explain what steps you should take if you suspect your bilingual child displays a language disorder.

Let’s start by talking about what the term “bilingual” means.

A person who is “bilingual” is a person who can speak two languages. Sometimes bilinguals learn two languages from birth, sometimes bilinguals learn one language at home and another language when they enter school, while others learn a second language later on in life. Children who learn two languages before the age of 5 years old often do not have an accent in either language. Bilinguals who learn a second language as teenagers or adults often do have an accent. Therefore, the earlier a bilingual child learns his two languages, the more like a native speaker he will sound. It is good to encourage your child to listen to and speak both languages in your home and community to foster early bilingual language development.

Children learn to be bilingual by hearing and speaking two languages frequently. Children might hear one or more languages at home. Children might learn only one language at school or they might hear more than one language at school. Any combination of these environments will

provide your child with the exposure that she needs to learn two languages. It is important that families use the language or languages that are most comfortable for them to communicate with one another. As long as your child has many opportunities to hear and speak both languages in everyday situations, he will learn both languages. Learning to speak two languages should be a natural and fun experience.

There are a variety of ways parents can encourage their children to become bilingual. One parent might choose to speak in one language while the other parent speaks in a different language. For example, Mom might speak in Spanish only and Dad might speak in English only. Another approach is for both parents to use both languages. In addition, some families might speak more than two languages at home. In those cases, each parent might choose his or her native language to use with the child and a different language to use as a family. For example, Mom might speak Mandarin and Dad might speak German when interacting with their child one-on-one, but when the family sits down together, everyone speaks in English. Still other families might use three languages interchangeably. All of these language environments will provide the opportunity for your child to learn more than one language. Remember, speaking in a way that is comfortable for you as a parent is the best approach to take.

It is important to know that a bilingual child's abilities in each language often change. Bilingual children might show stronger skills in one language compared to the other at certain times. This is perfectly normal. Bilingual children's skills in each language will change frequently depending on changes in their language environments. For example, your child might show stronger language skills in Spanish after spending the summer with her Spanish-speaking grandmother, but might show stronger skills in English during the school year when she is hearing English most of the day. It is natural for children's environments to change, so it is natural for your child's language abilities to change along with them. It is not uncommon for a child to demonstrate weak skills in one of her languages just to demonstrate stronger skills in that language 6 months later. As long as your child demonstrates strong language skills in at least of her two languages at any given time, there is no cause for concern.

Now that we've discussed how children become bilingual, let's talk about some common concerns parents might have about raising their child bilingual.

Some parents ask, "Will raising my child bilingual cause language problems?" The answer is no. Being bilingual does not cause language problems, nor does it make existing language problems worse. Bilingual children will learn both of their languages at a similar pace as monolingual children. At times we might see bilingual children moving at a slower pace when compared to monolingual children, but we also might see bilingual children learning language at a faster pace. Overall, bilingual children learn both of their languages within the normal time frame that we expect for children learning only one language. And, in fact, research with bilinguals indicates that there is a cognitive advantage for children and adults with strong language skills in both languages.

Another question parents might ask is, “Does my child have a language problem if he switches languages often?” The answer is no. This phenomenon is called code-switching. It is common in bilingual communities for bilingual speakers to switch languages when speaking. This is perfectly natural and is not cause for concern. You might hear your child use just one word from his other language in a sentence, such as, “Look! The dog brincó!” or “I want a jugo, Mamá.” Other times your child might switch to his other language to say an entire sentence, for example, “I don’t want to go to school. Quiero ir al parque.” Do not be concerned if you hear your child switching languages. The adults in his environment are doing the same thing!

A third question that parents might ask is, “How do I know if my bilingual child has a language disorder?” If you have concerns about your child’s language development, contact a bilingual speech-language pathologist through your local early Intervention program, pediatrician, or your child’s school. Your child must be evaluated in both languages to determine if she has a language problem. Bilingual children with language disorders will show problems in both of their languages, not just one. Be sure that your child is not being evaluated only in English – she has a lot of language skills in the second language too! We’ll talk more about this topic in a moment.

A fourth question a parent might ask is, “If my child has a language disorder, should I speak to her in English only?” The answer is no. Switching from two languages to one will not help improve your child’s language abilities. Children with language disorders will have a language-learning problem whether they speak one language or many languages. The best thing you can do as a parent is to continue to provide a good language model for your child, regardless of what language you are speaking in. Your stronger language might not be English and that’s okay. Speak in the language that is most comfortable for you, and your child will benefit.

Since we’re on the topic of language disorders in bilingual children, let’s discuss what we might hear in the language of a bilingual child who has a language disorder.

As we said before, bilingual children with language disorders will struggle to communicate in both of their languages. Bilingual children with typical language abilities might be stronger in one language or the other, but they will be able to communicate well in at least one of their languages. This is not so for bilingual children with language disorders.

So what should we expect to hear in the language of preschool and school-aged bilingual children with language disorders? Bilingual children with language disorders will speak in short

sentences, be difficult to understand, and will not know the names or functions of common objects in both languages. Bilingual children with language disorders might not be able to change their verbs to show something happened in the past. For example, they might not put the “ed” on “jumped” or might say “brinca” when they should have said “brincaron”. Bilingual children with language disorders might mix up “el” and “la” in Spanish. Pronouns are also difficult words for bilingual children with language disorders. In Spanish, bilingual children might omit the “la” in “la puso” by saying just “puso”. In English, bilingual children might not put an “s” on words that indicate more than one, for example, they might say “cat” instead of “cats”. Bilingual children with language disorders might not be able to follow simple directions or understand questions you ask them, even if you switch to the other language. Bilingual children with language disorders might also become frustrated when others cannot understand them, regardless of what language is being spoken.

So what should you do if you are worried about your bilingual child’s communication skills? Contact a bilingual speech-language pathologist. This person will be able to examine your child’s language skills in both languages to determine if a language disorder is present or not. Be sure to ask the speech-language pathologist if your child will be evaluated in English only, or if he will be evaluated in both languages. It is important that bilingual children are examined in both of their languages because they will not always learn the same information in each language. For example, a bilingual child might not know the word “dog” in English, but might know the word “perro” in Spanish. If he is examined in English only, all of his word knowledge in Spanish will be missed. Bilingual children who have strong vocabularies in at least one language do not have language disorders. Bilingual children with language disorders will demonstrate difficulty with learning words in both languages. The sooner you have your child evaluated by a bilingual speech-language pathologist, the better. If your child does have a language disorder, he will get the speech therapy services he needs sooner to help him become an effective communicator in his bilingual environment.

Today we learned that learning two languages is a natural process for children, and the earlier they start learning both languages, the better. We also learned that bilingual children’s abilities might be different in each language, but by giving bilingual children many opportunities to hear and speak each language, they will become successful communicators in both of their languages. We also discussed what to look for in bilingual children when a family member suspects a language disorder. We learned that we will observe characteristics of a language disorder in both languages. Finally, bilingual children should be evaluated in both languages by a certified bilingual speech-language pathologist if parents are worried about their child’s communication skills. Having the ability to speak more than one language is a wonderful skill. By providing your child with the opportunity to become bilingual, you are providing him with a life-long ability that will result in many positive cultural and educational outcomes.

Thank you very much for your interest in learning more about bilingual language development and disorders. If you want more help, guidance, or you have questions about the information covered in this session and would like to speak with a Speech-Language Pathologist about your child and their speech and language development, please feel free to contact the “Talking Matter’s Talk Line. And don’t forget: Talking matters, so have fun communicating with your kids!

