Bilingualism and school-aged children: What we know and where we go from here
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Bilingualism in children: What we know

- Fetuses respond uniquely to intonation and rhythmic patterns from different languages.
- Infants begin to “tune in” their speech perception to their native language(s) ~11 months.
- Toddlers raised bilingually differentiate and use their languages as expected in specific contexts (e.g., match their language with monolingual speakers/environments).
- Children learning a second language in school often go through a “silent period” (listen more than they speak), which can last several weeks, months, or even a year.
- Code-switching (using two languages in same phrase) by bilingual children and adults follows rule-based grammatical patterns, and represents normal behavior in bilinguals.
- Bilingual children exhibit cross-linguistic transfer (linguistic resources in each language support the other) across all domains of language as well as early literacy skills such as phonological awareness.
- School-aged Spanish-speaking children in the U.S. exhibit language-specific patterns of language growth over time: aggressive English growth during the academic year; alternating periods of fast and slow Spanish growth.
- Children with communication (speech-language), cognitive (e.g., Down syndrome), and social development (e.g., autism spectrum) disorders can develop bilingually.
- Healthy bilingual development is possible for all children, as long as exposure to adequate language models and academic support is provided for both languages.

Commonly held myths of “language confusion” are exactly that: Myths!

- Research evidence shows that children do not undergo “language confusion” when exposed to two (or more) languages.
- Children developing bilingually differentiate and use languages appropriately.
- Bilingual children coordinate and negotiate information across their languages.
- Bilingualism does not cause communication disorders, and monolingualism does not cure them.
- The language skills of bilingual children will likely differ in their two languages, and will not be identical to the language skills of monolingual children.
- Proficiency in the native and second language is associated with quantity and quality of exposure and support to each language.
School-aged bilingual children: The reality and the challenge

- English language learners (ELLs), children with negligible English proficiency, are projected to represent ~30% of the school-aged population by 2025.
- Majority (75%) of ELLs are Spanish-speaking.
- Long-standing academic achievement gap between ELLs and non-ELLs.
- ELLs are expected to perform academically as well as monolingual English students as quickly as possible in an unfamiliar language.
- Without native language support, ELLs are likely to undergo language loss, which can cause severe problems academically, socially, culturally, and with family.
- ELLs tend to live in socio-economically disadvantaged and segregated neighborhoods.
- Just as low expectations for ELLs are not ideal, setting high expectations without providing adequate support is not realistic.

My child is learning English as a second language: What can I do?

- **DO:**
  - Speak, sing, and read to/with your child in the language(s) you are most comfortable using, even if that is not English.
  - Involve family and age-appropriate peers, whether they speak the native language and/or English.
  - Communicate with your child’s teacher(s) and become involved in homework and school activities.
  - If you prefer to read and write in your native language, request that school-paperwork to be provided in your language.
  - If you prefer to communicate in your native language, request an interpreter for school-based meetings regarding your child.
- **DO NOT:**
  - Interact with your child in language(s) you are not comfortable or proficient in.
  - Limit contact with family or age-appropriate peers that do not speak English.
  - Assume that your child’s academic success is only dependent on the school.
  - Be timid about your involvement in your child’s education, even if you are not comfortable or proficient in English.

Web-based resources (available bilingually in English, Spanish, and other languages)

- ¡Colorín colorado! (Information and resources for parents, educators, and other professionals)
  [http://www.colorincolorado.org](http://www.colorincolorado.org)
- National Literacy Trust (Quick tips for parents available bilingually in 12 languages)
  [http://www.literacytrust.org.uk/talk_to_your_baby/resources/418_q_hello](http://www.literacytrust.org.uk/talk_to_your_baby/resources/418_q_hello)
- Acquiring English as a Second Language (What is “normal” and what is not)

Books

- *The Education of English Language Learners: Research to Practice* by Marilyn Shatz and Louise C. Wilkinson (2010).