

Raising Bilingual Children (I)

Science, Advantages and Models of Bilingualism

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The Science of Bilingualism

1. Bilinguals use all parts of the left brain:

- Frontal lobe, Parietal lobe, Temporal lobe, and Occipital Lobe;
- The Left Caudate, a small area in the left cerebral hemisphere, in between the Frontal and Temporal lobes, is responsible for the human ability of bilinguals to switch in between languages;
- The brain of children just 11 months of age is already specialized in monolingualism or bilingualism, according to the language/s they hear at home; this proves that the earlier we expose the child to bilingualism, the better;
- Compared to monolingual people, bilingual people use more their Frontal Lobe (Prefrontal and Orbitofrontal cortex) in charge of the executive function (which is responsible for attention and the distribution of tasks);
- Even if the children are not speaking the two languages, the same areas of the brain are active if the children are listening to the two languages;
- Some of the cognitive advantages of bilingualism are still present if a person does not know how to write one of the languages.

2. If bilingualism incorporates the Chinese language, then even the right part of the brain is activated:

- Chinese speakers also use the brain's right hemisphere, specifically the right superior temporal pole, due to Chinese being a tonal language.

Advantages of Bilingualism

1. Emotional:

- For heritage speakers: closer relationship with parents and relatives, better understanding of their cultural heritage;
- For heritage speakers: higher self-esteem, less identity problems;
- Bilingual non-heritage speakers: higher self-esteem and wider social acceptance (it is easier for them to make friends and be accepted in the communities that speak their second language).

2. Social:

- Multicultural;
- More tolerant of other cultures;
- Adapt better to cultural and social changes.

3. Academic and Professional:

- Better executive function, specially in memory and control (selective attention and interference suppression);
- Stronger adaptability;

- More creative, elastic thinking;
- Easier to learn other languages;
- College and employment benefits;

4. Health:

- The likelihood for bilinguals to develop Alzheimer's disease is five times less than in monolinguals.

Misconceptions about Bilingualism

All of these statements are **FALSE**:

- Bilingualism is a rare occurrence;
- Bilingualism always causes speech delay or disorders;
- The language spoken at home will have a negative effect on the acquisition of the school language;
- Bilinguals will always have less vocabulary in both languages;
- Children raised bilingual will always mix their languages;
- Bilinguals speak both languages equally well.

Models of Bilingualism

Strategy 1:

Each parent speaks a different language to the child;

Strategy 2:

Both parents speak one language to the child, he/she acquires a second language at school;

Strategy 3:

Both parents speak both languages to the child.

My Family's Model

- Consistency, clear expectations, constant effort:
 1. We chose strategy 1.
 2. Chinese/Spanish at home, English at school;
 3. We speak to our kids in Chinese or Spanish at all times;
 4. We establish a relationship of mutual respect: "You do what is important for me, and I do what is important for you";
 5. We do not allow our Spanish or Chinese-speaking friends or relatives to speak to our children in English;
 6. We look for extracurricular classes taught in Chinese or Spanish (music, sports, art etc.);
 7. We travel around Spain, Latin America and China;
 8. We celebrate our cultural festivities, take pride on our cultural heritages;
 9. We disconnected the TV when the kids were born but always had a great variety of movies, books and CDs in Spanish and Chinese for them to choose from.

Model and Strategies

1. Parents **choose a model** of bilingualism to follow.
2. Parents **choose strategies** on how to implement the chosen model:
 - To how many hours of each language will the child be exposed?
 - How will the exposure happen (parents, classes, TV)?
 - What materials will we use (textbooks, novels, movies)?
3. Parents are **consistent**;
4. It does not matter if the child has been raised bilingual since birth, or if she has acquired the second language a little bit later in life. What matters is the **amount of exposure** to those languages.

Parent Attitudes

- Be consistent and do not break your own rules;
- Start from easy to complex;
- Appreciate/praise child efforts;
- Do not allow others to make fun of your child's skills;
- Do not over correct; paraphrase and expand instead:

Child: "Yesterday I go to park" Parent: "Yes, yesterday you *went to the* park. Did you have fun there?"

- Choose topics interesting to the child; make it fun;
- Be an attentive listener.

An expert's main advice for parents who speak Spanish:

"Many adults find it very difficult to speak their community language to their children consistently. They frequently fall back into English because this is the language they speak to everybody else. This way the child is placed in a situation like the following:

Mummy speaks English or Greek to me and everybody else speaks English to me. Consequently I can choose to speak English or Greek to Mummy, but because I hear English much more than Greek, English is easier to use. So why should I use Greek?

However, if the parent can get used to only speaking the community language himself when interacting with the child, then the following scenario is the one that presents itself to the child:

Daddy speaks English to most people, but with me he only speaks Italian. I love Daddy and I like him to spend special time with me. I want to do everything Daddy does and I also want to speak like him.

In order for the adult to feel comfortable about using the community language with the child it is best to make a decision to never speak anything but this particular language with the child and to start this as soon as the child is born or from the first time you have contact with a child if she is not your own."

Dr. Susanne Döpke
Monash University, Australia

An expert's main advice for parents who do not speak Spanish:

“The really important factor in children acquiring two (or more) languages, and then maintaining them, is the need they have for those languages: to communicate with parents and family members, to take part in daycare or school activities, to interact with people in their community, etc. If parents can create the need for more than one language, and other factors are favorable, then children will become bilingual.”

François Grosjean
Professor Emeritus
Université de Neuchâtel
Switzerland

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