

LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT MILESTONES FOR BILINGUAL AND MONOLINGUAL CHILDREN

Between September and December 2023, Babylonia collected questions from parents regarding their children's language development. This article aims to answer the following questions:

- When should my child start talking?
- What are the typical milestones in language development?

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Introduction

“And, is your baby saying anything yet?": this is a question young parents frequently hear. Indeed, almost anywhere in the world, starting to speak is considered a key event in a young child's life. Language acquisition specialists have identified several such key events or milestones in young children's language development. If children miss out on certain language development milestones (henceforth: milestones), they may be experiencing problems with the language learning process and may need professional help (see the article on Communication Disorders Essentials for Parents by E. Babatsouli elsewhere in this volume).

If their toddlers are *not* saying anything by the time they are one and a half, many parents will be worried. They will worry because grandma says that is not normal, and something must be wrong, or because they have heard other toddlers speak quite well.

Parents are thus comparing their own children's behavior to that of others. Speech and language professionals do the same, based on their experience with many more children and, where available, on so-called “norming studies”. These give information on behaviors in large groups of same-aged children. Any given child can then be compared to others and may be doing better than 80 % of her peers (nothing to worry about!), or worse than 10 % of her peers (that may indicate a problem), or anywhere in between. Milestones represent norms, “standards”, for children's expected language development.

Milestones are primarily identified for very young children: what happens in the first years is crucial for later developments. This article focuses on bilingual and monolingual children under age 3 who have been growing up with a particular language from birth. It draws

When should my child start talking?



mainly on Clark (2024) and De Houwer (2009, 2021). The bilinguals here have heard two first languages from the very beginning.

For children raised with two languages, parents and language professionals often expect a delay in reaching milestones compared to monolinguals (cf. my article on Myths About Bilingual Development And Why They Hurt elsewhere in this volume). However, there are no differences between the ages at which bilinguals and monolinguals reach important milestones.

The main milestones and their timings

There are milestones that are important for all children and milestones that are relevant only for bilingual children.

(a) Milestones that are important for all children

The 5 milestones below are the most significant ones for the under-threes. However, they are not the only important steps in child language development (see the website of the American Speech-Language-Hearing Association ASHA (n.d.) for an easily accessible and more comprehensive list). There is great variation in the ages around which the 5 milestones are reached. The range of variation is similar for bilinguals and monolinguals. Although the number of

early words understood is not mentioned as a milestone here, it is noteworthy that the number of words 13-month-old bilinguals understand equals the average number expected for much older, 18-month-old monolinguals.

(1) Babbling

Babbling consisting of apparently meaningless strings of repeated syllables, like *bababa*, or *gugu*, or combined variations like *dadabubu*, occurs mostly between 7 and 10 months. Although some elements of babbling may sound like one particular language, and others like another, babbling is usually not clearly linked to a particular language. Babbling is a rather solitary activity that babies often engage in while they are in bed. They do not normally use babbling to talk to somebody.

(2) Understanding words

Children need to understand words as an entry into language. Typically, they will first learn to respond to their own name. However, it is only by 9 or 10 months of age that most babies will show clear understanding of some words and phrases. By the time children are 11 or 12 months old, parents are usually able to list many different words that they think their child understands.

(3) First words

The first birthday often coincides with what parents interpret as children's first word. Rather than apparently meaningless babbling, children now use word-like forms that appear to mean something. They may say something in the company



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of a parent while pointing and looking at an object or person. However, they may also start to say word-like forms to accompany actions or events, even if nobody else is present. For instance, they may say *oop* when they fall down or something has fallen down. The difference with babbling is that (a) there appears to be meaning attached to something children says, and (b) the forms of what they say differ from the repeated syllables used in babbling. Most children will have started saying their first word by age 13 months. Bilingual children may start out saying words only in a single language, or in both.

The answer to the question on the previous page, then, is that children should start talking at the beginning of their second year.

(4) Saying a total of 50 different words

In the course of the second year of life, the number of different words that children say increases. Some children add new words very fast, others take a lot more time. By the second birthday, children should at minimum have recently used 50 different words in speaking. Many children, including bilinguals, reach the 50-word mark well before (by 20 months). The 50-word mark is important because you need a sufficient number of words to be able to build sentences.

(5) Combining words

Indeed, in language we use combinations of words to form sentences. Much of our speaking consists of sentences, although we also use single words, as in *yes* or *no* or *there*. Once children start to use single words, they typically will *only* say single words. But after some time, they will also start to combine 2 words without a pause in between. They may say things like *bottle done*, or *pick up*, or *mommy no*. Being able to combine words with each other for constructing a larger meaning than each word by itself is a crucial step towards being able to say longer sentences that combine multiple words. No wonder that the ability to combine words is also a major milestone. It is expected that by the second birthday, children have started to combine at least 2 words with each other.

Most children start combining words well before they turn 2, and may soon

be combining 3 or 4 words with each other. Verbally precocious children may be constructing veritable sentences by age 2. Bilingual children's early word combinations may consist of 2 words from the same language (unilingual utterances), or of one word from each language (mixed utterances). Bilinguals may combine words in each of their two languages from the very beginning, or just in one.

(b) Milestones important only for bilingual children

In addition to the universal milestones listed above, there are at least two main milestones that are relevant to young bilinguals but not to monolinguals.

(6) Understanding words in two languages

Crucial in a bilingual setting is that children learn to understand words and phrases in two languages rather than just one. Without comprehension in two languages, children cannot qualify as bilingual (see below for a discussion of speaking two languages). By the time they are 13 months of age, bilingual children understand words in each of their languages.

(7) Showing evidence of separate grammatical systems

Children start to use clear grammatical markers in their speech once they start to use sentences containing 3 or 4 words. As for monolinguals, there is great variation in the ages when bilinguals start to do this, but by the time children are about 3, they should typically say sentences with at least 4 words.

Soon after bilingual children start to build sentences consisting of 3 or 4 words, most of their sentences with words from the same single language (unilingual utterances) follow the grammatical rules of that language (including word order rules). They do this in each of their languages. This means that bilinguals typically develop 2 separate grammatical systems.

Bilingual children show evidence of two basically separate grammatical systems by age 3 at the very latest (many bilingual children show evidence of separate grammatical systems already around age 2 and earlier). Bilingual children who

References

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appear to use a fused grammatical system even by age 3 are thus developing outside the bilingual norm. We can consider age 3 as a normative milestone for bilingual children's use of different grammatical systems.

Aside from milestones (6) and (7) there may be other typically bilingual milestones that can give information on how well bilingual children are developing language skills. A possible candidate may be bilingual children's use of translation equivalents, that is, words from each language that basically mean the same thing.

Do bilingual children reach language milestones at the same time in both of their languages?

Bilingual children typically are learning to understand and say words and sentences in 2 languages. These language abilities do not necessarily develop in each language simultaneously. Uneven development across languages is common, meaning that one language develops faster for some or all aspects of language use than the other. As far as speaking is concerned, development may be so uneven that children speak just a single language.

The fact that it is normal for bilingual children to develop each language at different speeds implies that they can reach specific milestones in each language at different times. Uneven development also allows for the possibility that some milestones are only reached for a single language.

For bilingual children, then, one should not expect milestones to be reached in each of 2 languages separately; nor should one expect milestones to be reached in 2 languages simultaneously. Of course, there are many bilingual children who do reach particular milestones in both languages, and who reach these at the same time for both languages. As is also the case for monolingual children, however, reaching a particular milestone in just a single language is what counts. Once bilingual children have reached a milestone in a particular language, and have done so around the expected age, they are showing the level of linguistic development associated with that milestone. The

fact that they have not reached that same milestone in the other language will then be due to other factors, such as lesser opportunity to hear that language. It is only when bilingual children have not reached an expected milestone for either of their languages that one has to start worrying. Bilingual children who fail to reach expected milestones in either of their languages may have hearing difficulties or another kind of physiologically and/or neurologically determined condition that is known to delay language development. It is also possible that bilingual children with a language delay are deprived of the right kind of language input in both their languages.

For identifying bilingual children's milestones involving the size of their vocabulary their total word knowledge must be taken into account, as is done for monolingual children. Bilingual children's total word knowledge combines the words they know in both languages.

Conclusion

Specific bilingual milestones apply to bilingual children in addition to the more universal language development milestones that are relevant for all children. Children are expected to start talking a bit soon after their first birthday. Bilinguals and monolinguals reach milestones at similar ages, showing no evidence of a bilingual "delay". In fact, monolinguals can be seen as being delayed in comparison to bilinguals when the total number of words understood is considered.

