

MYTHS ABOUT BILINGUAL DEVELOPMENT AND WHY THEY HURT

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

- What are the most common myths about multilingual parenting?
- What are the advantages and disadvantages of language development in a multilingual environment?

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Introduction

When young children grow up with more than a single language they learn from very early on that the same thing can have different names. They also soon learn to adjust how they speak to the person they are speaking to, that is, they learn to fluently switch between languages depending on who they are talking to. These early experiences are thought to lead to a high degree of cognitive flexibility and language awareness in child bilinguals, both considered advantages for children's academic development. Having sustained early experience with two or three languages is also thought to be an advantage when children start learning a foreign language at school. Of course the main advantage of being bilingual from early on is that you can speak to many more people than if you knew just a single language.

However, children who are raised with multiple languages may also have negative experiences that are linked to their

bilingualism. These negative experiences are often the result of people in children's environments being biased against early child bilingualism. Such biases are fixed beliefs that are not supported by actual facts: they are myths. In the so-called Western world and beyond (Genesee, 2015; Turnbull, 2023), such myths have existed for at least 100 years. Solid research on child bilingualism was quite rare before 1995 or so, so there wasn't much scientific evidence that could address common pre-scientific beliefs. Sadly, even though now there is a great deal of solid research on child bilingualism that has debunked most of them (De Houwer, 2009, 2021), many myths persist.

Common myths about early bilingual development and what the research says

(1) "Bilingual children experience delayed language development compared to monolingual peers". Unfortunately this idea is very common. Apart from the



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problem that monolingualism is taken as a standard for bilingualism, the statement is not supported by research. There are no bilingual-monolingual differences in the rate of language development (read De Houwer & Pascall's blog article about it in each of 4 languages; see also the article on Language Development Milestones for Bilingual and Monolingual Children in this volume).

(2) "Children growing up bilingually always use a language mixture". It is true that some of the sentences that bilingual children say may contain words from each language. The use of such "mixed utterances" is very normal for all bilinguals when they speak to people they think will understand them. Amongst others, using mixed utterances is a way of relying on your entire vocabulary to use the word you think fits best. However, so far no bilingual child has been found to use *only* or *mainly* mixed utterances - they represent at most about a third of some children's language use; for most children mixed utterances are an exception. What's more, all children who have grown up with two or more languages from birth are capable of saying sentences in just one single language, without any structural influence from another language. Indeed, being able to do so is an important milestone that most bilingual children have reached by age 3 at the latest (see the article on Language Development Milestones for Bilingual and Monolingual Children in this volume).

(3) Related to myth 2 is the idea that "children growing up with two languages cannot learn any one language well". The millions of bilingual children who are fluent in both or at least one of their

languages offer strong counterevidence to this idea.

(4) A myth related to myth 3 is that "children get confused when they are confronted with two languages". For children who have grown up with two or more languages from birth it is perfectly normal to hear two or more languages, and to switch languages depending on who they are talking to or where they are. This ability starts very early in some children (at age 15 months), but is usually in place in two-year-olds. There is no confusion.

(5) Another myth is that "when children hear a language other than the school language at home, this hinders their learning of the school language properly". There is no evidence for this common belief. Bilingual children may have heard two or more languages at home from birth, including the school language. These children have been growing up in a Bilingual First Language Acquisition (BFLA) setting. Often, teachers may not realize that BFLA children know another language besides the school language: that's how well BFLA children, like their monolingual counterparts who have only heard the school language from birth, generally perform in the school language. Other bilingual children may have heard only a non-school language (or two) at home since birth, and the school language only once they attended preschool (in what is called an Early Second Language Acquisition (ESLA) setting) or primary school (in what is called a Second Language Acquisition (SLA) setting). These ESLA and SLA children can learn the new school language faster and better if they have a good foundation in the



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What are the most common myths about multilingual parenting?

non-school language. Their knowledge of the non-school language actually boosts their learning of the school language (review of BFLA, ESLA and SLA in De Houwer, 2021).

(6) A more positively worded myth is that “small children easily pick up two or more languages”. However, it is not true that small children easily pick up two or more languages. It takes many years for both bilingual and monolingual children to build up a large vocabulary that will allow them to fluently speak about a range of topics. No adult wants to speak like a six-year-old. The fact that some children are able to soon mimic some words and phrases in a new language (e.g., through vacation with children from diverse backgrounds) doesn't mean they have really learned that language. It takes a lot of learning opportunities and time to really learn a language. Children with fewer learning opportunities take longer. Over the early childhood years and beyond, children cumulatively and slowly learn through active and very frequent, repetitive, interaction with people who speak better than they.

Myths (1) to (6) are about the bilingual development process. There is one pervasive myth that relates to the circumstances in which children become bilingual. This is the myth that “the one person, one language (OPOL) method is the only one that can yield “perfectly” bilingual children”. Clearly, though, that is NOT the case. Research has shown that in up to a quarter of families using the OPOL method children speak only a single language, that is, the school language. At the same time, bilingual families using another approach stand a much better

chance of having children who speak the two languages heard at home. Those are families where both parents speak the same non-school language at home, and in addition one parent speaks the school language. Families where both parents speak both languages at home have the same (low) chance as OPOL families of having children who actually speak two languages (review in De Houwer, 2009).

How can myths about bilingual development hurt?

Even though there has been an exponential growth in science communication about the research on bilingual development to a wider audience (including to professionals such as speech therapists, doctors, and teachers), the myths persist. Parents may believe in some of them. They are also heard from doctors, speech therapists, educators, and teachers. We read the biases in the media and unfortunately also in some of the academic literature. The reason they persist, even in the face of scientific counterevidence, is likely related to generally negative attitudes towards bilingualism and specific languages (see the article by Kircher on linguistic discrimination in this volume).

The continued existence of non-scientific biases stand in the way of Harmonious Bilingualism for families, that is, for bilingual families' well-being as it relates to language (read more about Harmonious Bilingualism through <https://www.habilnet.org>). Below are some examples.

(i) Threat to parental well-being

Many parents who believe that speaking two languages to children slows language

development or confuses children will decide to speak only one language at home. Parents whose language is not used will often feel embarrassed towards their own parents and will feel they have been inadequate in fulfilling their parental educational task.

(ii) Threat to parent and child well-being

A lot of pediatricians, speech therapists, educators, and teachers still advise parents who speak a language other than the school language at home to stop using that language (even though such advice goes against the United Nations Convention for Child Rights). Such advice makes parents feel quite insecure. If they decide to follow the advice, they will have monolingual children who can no longer build ties with family members who speak only the non-school language. Furthermore, many parents feel very bad when their child does not speak their language. When children become young adults, they are often angry at their parents for not giving them sufficient opportunity to learn to speak their language of origin. Children may feel they have lost part of their identity as a result.

(iii) Threat to children's well-being

If doctors believe that a bilingual setting leads to language delay they may fail to recognize an underlying medical problem such as a hearing impairment in time, with quite negative consequences for young children, since they have been deprived of the optimal language input they need to learn language. It is very difficult to catch up later.

Many schools require children to speak only the school language. This

requirement suppresses a large part of children's identity and does not contribute to their well-being.

Conclusion

There is a continuing need to address harmful myths about bilingual development through information campaigns of all kinds and through broad and good educational provisions for students embarking on professions that might lead to contacts with bilingual children. These campaigns, however, need to be based on methodologically sound scientific research. Luckily, researchers are more and more reaching out to parents and educators through online resources. Readers may find support through research-based initiatives such as the series of podcasts offered by Kletsheads (<https://kletsheadspodcast.org/>). The website of the Harmonious Bilingualism Network (HaBilNet, <https://www.habilnet.org>) and its associated YouTube and VIMEO channels contain a wealth of research-based information, and HaBilNet has a free individual consultation service (find out how it works through <https://www.habilnet.org/whats-it-like-to-request-a-habilnet-consultation/>). These resources can empower parents in countering discriminatory attitudes from professionals with science-based knowledge.

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