

## BRIDGING THE GAP BETWEEN SCIENTIFIC RESEARCH AND PARENTAL CONCERNS ON CHILDREN LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT

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Since its founding in 1991, Babylonia has aimed to bridge the gap between scientific research and language education practice. Most of our issues have been addressed to language teachers and teacher trainers. With this special issue, we want to widen our mission and provide accessible, evidence-based answers to parents and caregivers of young children.

As any new parent knows, welcoming a child is one of the happiest but also most unsettling moments in a person's life. As soon as the concerns about feeding, health and physical safety fade, questions about the child's motor and language development arise: Is my child starting to walk when they should? Is my child talking as they should? What should I do to help them? Why is my neighbor's toddler developing differently?

Even if one tries to avoid comparison, playground interaction with other parents and caregivers inevitably turns around these same questions and raises doubts and insecurities. When Google, chatGPT and other bots are called upon,

Sin dalla sua fondazione nel 1991, Babylonia ha cercato di colmare il divario tra la ricerca scientifica e la realtà dell'educazione linguistica. La maggior parte dei nostri temi sono stati rivolti a insegnanti di lingue e formatori di insegnanti. Con questo numero speciale, vogliamo estendere la nostra missione e fornire risposte adeguate e basate su dati concreti ai genitori e a coloro che si occupano di bambini piccoli.

Come ogni neo-genitore sa, l'arrivo di un bambino è uno dei momenti più felici ma anche più sconvolgenti della vita di una persona. Non appena le preoccupazioni relative all'alimentazione, alla salute e alla sicurezza fisica si affievoliscono, sorgono domande sullo sviluppo motorio e linguistico del bambino: quando dovrebbe iniziare a camminare il mio bambino? Il mio bambino parla come normalmente? Cosa devo fare per aiutarlo? Perché il bambino del mio vicino ha uno sviluppo diverso?

Anche se si cerca di evitare il confronto, le interazioni nel parco giochi con altri

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they give nothing but vague, contradictory, and potentially distressing answers.

Yet language acquisition is a fertile field of research, and fairly straightforward answers can be given to most of the questions parents have. This Special Issue of *Babylonia* has been designed to do so. Bringing together contributions from renowned experts from around the world, it aims to equip and reassure parents in an exciting but sometimes complex adventure as they accompany and support the language development of their young children.

To achieve this, we created an online platform to collect questions from curious and concerned parents about their children's language development. During a short three month campaign, we received 20+ questions that we then grouped by topic. Afterwards we sent them to recognized experts with the request to answer the questions clearly and briefly, focusing on the most important points. The thirteen resulting articles cover a wide range of fundamental topics to help parents support their children's communicative abilities.

genitori e educatori fa sorgere inevitabilmente queste stesse domande e solleva dubbi e insicurezze. Se ci si rivolge a Google, chatGPT e altri bot, questi non danno altro che risposte vaghe, contraddittorie e potenzialmente angoscianti.

Tuttavia, l'acquisizione del linguaggio è un ambito di ricerca ricco di risorse e si possono dare risposte abbastanza chiare alla gran parte delle domande che i genitori si pongono. Questo numero speciale di *Babylonia* è stato concepito proprio per questo. Riunendo i contributi di rinomati esperti di tutto il mondo, si propone di aiutare e rassicurare i genitori in un'avventura emozionante, ma a volte complessa, come quella di accompagnare e sostenere lo sviluppo linguistico dei loro bambini.

A tal fine, abbiamo creato una piattaforma online per raccogliere le domande di genitori curiosi e preoccupati sullo sviluppo del linguaggio dei loro figli. Durante una breve campagna di tre mesi, abbiamo ricevuto oltre 20 domande che abbiamo poi raggruppato a seconda dell' tema. Successivamente le abbiamo inviate a esperti riconosciuti con la richiesta di rispondere alle domande in modo chiaro e breve, concentrandosi sui punti più importanti. I tredici articoli che ne sono scaturiti coprono un'ampia gamma di argomenti fondamentali per aiutare i genitori a sostenere le capacità comunicative dei loro figli.



Annick De Houwer retired from her position as Professor of Language Acquisition and Multilingualism at the University of Erfurt (Germany) a few years ago but remains active and directs the Harmonious Bilingualism Network (HaBilNet).



Anna Ghimenton is Professor at the Université Grenoble Alpes and is interested in documenting language acquisition and socialisation in various language contact settings.



Amelia Lambelet is a Professor at the University of Teacher Education, State of Vaud (HEP Vaud), and the managing editor of *Babylonia*

**The first half of this Special Issue discusses points that are relevant to all children, regardless of how many languages or language varieties they are growing up with.**

We begin with an article by **Annick De Houwer** that provides fundamental information for parents on typical language development milestones in both bilingual and monolingual children. This article focusing on the basics may ease parents' concerns about when their children should start talking and whether they are on the right track for language development.

**Sophie Kern** then gives essential advice to parents on how to support their child's early language acquisition from the very first months onwards. The article is relevant to all children, whether they are growing up with one, two, or more languages.

One aspect that has become quite popular in how parents interact with very young children is the use of Baby Sign. Set against a brief explanation of the meaning of gestures, **Stéphanie Gobet** explains what Baby Sign is and what its potential advantages are.

In a world where screens are perhaps inevitable, many parents worry about their detrimental effect on young children's language learning and general cognitive development. **Ludovica Serratrice** examines the impact of screen time on children's language learning, providing a nuanced perspective on how digital media can be leveraged to support language development when used appropriately.

**La première moitié de ce numéro spécial aborde des points qui concernent tous les enfants, quel que soit le nombre de langues ou de variétés avec lesquelles ils grandissent.**

Nous débutons avec un article d'**Annick De Houwer** qui fournit aux parents des informations fondamentales sur les étapes typiques du développement du langage chez les enfants monolingues et bilingues. En se concentrant sur les aspects essentiels, cet article permettra assurément de rassurer les parents quant au moment où leurs enfants devraient commencer à parler et quant à leur progression en matière de développement du langage.

**Sophie Kern** poursuit avec des conseils précieux pour aider les parents à soutenir l'acquisition précoce du langage de leur enfant, et ce dès les tout premiers mois. Ces recommandations concernent tous les enfants, qu'ils grandissent avec une, deux ou plusieurs langues.

Un sujet qui suscite de plus en plus d'intérêt chez les parents de jeunes enfants est l'utilisation du Baby Sign. **Stéphanie Gobet** décrit ce qu'est le Baby Sign et d'où il vient, puis en souligne les avantages potentiels pour le développement de l'enfant.

Dans un monde où les écrans sont peut-être inévitables, de nombreux parents s'inquiètent de leurs effets néfastes sur l'apprentissage du langage et le développement cognitif général des jeunes enfants. **Ludovica Serratrice** examine l'impact du temps passé devant un écran sur l'apprentissage du langage par les enfants, en apportant une perspective nuancée sur la manière dont les médias numériques peuvent être utilisés pour soutenir le développement du langage lorsqu'ils sont utilisés de manière appropriée.

**Sometimes language development does not follow the expected path. Three articles show how developmental patterns may vary.**

**Elena Babatsouli** identifies various signs that may indicate critical differences in developmental paths. Whilst it is important to know how to read these signs and bring awareness to them, it is all the more important to know the resources that are available for supporting children with special needs, creating safe environments for both children and their families.

**Agnès Witko** addresses the likelihood of bilingual children developing dyslexia. The paper addresses this issue and builds clear links between, on the one hand, the milestones for bilingual development detailed in Annick De Houwer's paper and, on the other hand, the relations between the development of literacy detailed in Janice Nakamura's contribution.

**Margaret Kehoe's** article focuses on children's speech sounds. After a discussion of "accent" in bilingual children, there is an explanation of what can go wrong with the development of children's speech sounds in both bilingual and monolingual children and how intervention can help.

**Manchmal verläuft die Sprachentwicklung nicht wie erwartet. Drei Artikel zeigen, wie unterschiedlich die Entwicklungsmuster sein können.**

**Elena Babatsouli** nennt verschiedene Anzeichen, die auf kritische Unterschiede im Entwicklungsverlauf hinweisen können. Es ist zwar wichtig zu wissen, wie man diese Anzeichen erkennt und sich ihrer bewusst wird, aber noch wichtiger ist es, die Ressourcen zu kennen, die zur Unterstützung von Kindern mit besonderen Bedürfnissen zur Verfügung stehen, um ein sicheres Umfeld für Kinder und ihre Familien zu schaffen.

**Agnès Witko** befasst sich mit der Wahrscheinlichkeit, dass mehrsprachige Kinder Legasthenie entwickeln. Sie geht auf diese Frage ein und stellt klare Verbindungen her zwischen den Meilensteinen der mehrsprachigen Entwicklung, die im Beitrag von Annick De Houwer beschrieben werden, und den Beziehungen zwischen der Entwicklung der Lese- und Schreibfähigkeit, die im Beitrag von Janice Nakamura beschrieben werden.

Der Artikel von **Margaret Kehoe** konzentriert sich auf die Sprachlaute von Kindern. Nach einer Erörterung des „Akzents“ bei mehrsprachigen Kindern wird erläutert, was bei der Entwicklung der Sprachlaute von Kindern sowohl bei mehrsprachigen als auch bei einsprachigen Kindern schief laufen kann und wie Interventionen helfen können.

**Yet language acquisition is a fertile field of research, and fairly straightforward answers can be given to most of the questions parents have.**

**The second part of this Special Issue concerns bilingual language development, that is, the development of two or more languages.**

Our experts offer research-based advice for parents raising children with multiple languages, and address challenges like minority language maintenance, teaching children literacy in several languages, and coping with common myths and misconceptions.

**Ruth Kircher** discusses general settings within which bilingual families find themselves. These settings may be discriminatory, but parents can take charge and try to advocate for language policy changes in their community to the benefit of their children's bilingual development. It helps if parents are empowered through research based knowledge that can counter myths about early bilingual development.

**Annick De Houwer** zooms in on some of those myths. Unfortunately, they help perpetuate persistent societal biases and express harmful attitudes that stand in the way of harmonious bilingual development. After each myth the article briefly explains the actual research-based facts about early bilingualism.

**Het tweede deel van dit speciale nummer gaat over tweetalige taalontwikkeling, dat wil zeggen de ontwikkeling van twee of meer talen.**

Onze experts geven op onderzoek gebaseerd advies voor ouders die kinderen opvoeden met meerdere talen en gaan in op uitdagingen zoals het behoud van minderheidstalen, kinderen leren lezen en schrijven in verschillende talen en het omgaan met veelvoorkomende mythen en misvattingen.

**Ruth Kircher** bespreekt de algemene omstandigheden waarin tweetalige gezinnen zich bevinden. Deze omgevingen kunnen discriminerend zijn, maar ouders kunnen actief worden en proberen te pleiten voor veranderingen in het taalbeleid in hun gemeenschap ten gunste van de tweetalige ontwikkeling van hun kinderen. Het helpt als ouders worden gesterkt door op onderzoek gebaseerde kennis die mythes over vroege tweetalige ontwikkeling kan ontkrachten.

**Annick De Houwer** zoomt in op een aantal van die mythes. Helaas houden ze hardnekkige maatschappelijke vooroordelen in stand en gaan ze uit van schadelijke attitudes die een harmonische tweetalige ontwikkeling in de weg staan. Na elke mythe geeft het artikel een korte uitleg van de op onderzoek gebaseerde feiten over vroege tweetaligheid.

Throughout this Special Issue, the expert contributors draw on the latest research to empower parents with the knowledge and strategies they need to foster thriving children, whether they are learning just one or more than one language. We hope the Issue will serve as a valuable resource for families navigating the exciting and complex world of language development.

The final 4 articles discuss various ways in which parents can support their children's developing bilingualism.

**Virginia Gathercole** focuses on the role of exposure to each of the languages children are hearing, and especially on exposure to a minority language. She gives tips about how to increase this exposure and lay the foundation for children's positive attitudes towards their minority language.

Likewise, but from a different perspective, **Simona Montanari** stresses the importance of children having a lot of contact with the minority language. While she recognizes that the "one person, one language" strategy is far from generally effective, she offers insights into how parents can use it to support early bilingual development.

**Nikolay Slavkov** emphasizes the importance of children developing positive attitudes towards all the languages they need in their daily lives, and stresses the fact that children themselves are major actors in the developmental process. However, they must have sufficient and varied opportunities to learn each language.

Questions about bilingual language development are not limited to the moment when children enter school. **Janice Nakamura** details the various occasions when children are exposed to literacy. These are introduced well before formal schooling and offer important opportunities for the development of metalinguistic knowledge about the ways in which different writing systems encode oral language.

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En questa ediziun speciala serefereschan las expertas ed ils experts als pli novs resultats da perscrutaziuns per dar vinvon als geniturs las enconuschientschas e strategias ch'els drovan per promover affons cun success, independentamein dil fatg sch'els emprendan mo in ni plirs lungatgs. Nus sperein che l'ediziun surve-schi sco resursa preziosa a famiglias per sesanflar el mund interessant e cumplex dil svilup linguistic.