



Children's Language Development

Both society at large and many educational and health professionals hold competing views about whether dual language learning should be supported early in a child's development and later in school as it may confusing children to learn two languages at once. Research, described in more detail below, has shown that given adequate exposure to two languages, young children can acquire full competence in both.

Promoting the Educational Success of Children and Youth Learning English: Promising Futures (2017), a report from the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, describes the capacities of and influences on dual language learners' (DLLs)¹ language development. This brief summarizes the report's findings in these areas.



What Science Reveals about Bilingualism

Scientific evidence clearly points to a universal, underlying capacity to learn two languages as easily as one. Infants are adept at learning the specific sounds and sound sequences of language; their ability to discriminate speech sounds becomes language-specific during the second half of the first year of life (between 6-9 months of age). Children who are DLLs have an impressive capacity to manage their two languages when communicating with others. For instance, they can differentiate when to use each language based on the language known or preferred by the people to whom they are speaking.

Recent research evidence also points to cognitive advantages for bilinguals. Learning and using two languages enhances executive functioning, the ability to plan, control one's attention, regulate one's behavior, and think flexibly. Bilinguals often exhibit a broad set of advantages that are related to the ability to control their focus of attention. They may also have advantages in spatial and verbal working memory and other components of executive functioning that emerge as early as 18 months of age. Such advantages are observed most commonly among bilinguals who became highly proficient in both of their languages at early ages.

There is no evidence that the use of two languages in the home, or the use of one in the home and another in an early care and education setting, from birth to age 5, confuses DLLs or puts the development of one or both of their languages at risk. Given adequate exposure to two languages, young children have the capacity to develop competence in vocabulary, morphology, syntax, and pragmatics in both.

¹ The term "dual language learner" (DLL) is used to refer to children birth to age 5 in their homes, communities, or early care and education (ECE) programs.



Influences on Dual Language Learning

The competence with which children learn their primary language and English varies considerably among individuals, which may be explained by multiple factors—for example, early versus late exposure to a second language, parents’ immigrant generational status and years in the United States, socioeconomic status, exposure to the risks of poverty, status of the first language in the community, and neighborhood features. Parents from different cultural communities have differing views and practices concerning their role as teachers of their children and how and how much they communicate with their children. These differences influence children’s language development.

Early exposure to a second language (before approximately 3 years of age) is consistently associated with better language skills in that second language. Children exposed to two languages simultaneously demonstrate the same developmental trajectory in each language as that seen in monolingual children, provided they have adequate exposure to each language.

A key question has been the extent to which children’s ability in the first language supports or hinders their acquisition of a second. Some immigrant parents may fear that talking with their child in the first language will slow or interfere with English acquisition; teachers also express this concern. But building a strong base in a child’s home language or L1 facilitates the development of skills in a second and even third language.

Use of the first language in various settings is associated with the development of a healthy ethnic identity in early childhood and lessens the potential negative psychological effects that can occur if the first language is lost, such as weakening relationships with parents and other family members. In addition, research indicates that children’s language development benefits when adults talk to them in the language in which the adults are most competent and with which they are most comfortable.

Children’s participation in literacy activities such as shared book reading, storytelling, reciting nursery rhymes, and singing songs supports their language growth and emerging literacy. There is ample evidence for the benefits of shared book reading and exposure to print for children’s vocabulary size, phonemic awareness, print concept knowledge, and positive attitudes toward literacy. These benefits generalize to DLL preschoolers as well.

Parents of DLLs can promote a sense of community by socializing children in ways that maintain important features of their culture of origin. Immigrant parents may seek out community organizations that offer classes in the first language, schools in which the curriculum of the country of origin is taught, or religious institutions that promote children’s ethnic and cultural identity.

This brief is based on the report *Promoting the Educational Success of Children and Youth Learning English: Promising Futures*, a PDF of which can be downloaded free of charge at <https://www.nap.edu/catalog/24677>.