
Will two languages delay my child?

Many children are raised in bilingual families, where maybe one parent speaks one language and the other speaks a different language, or maybe the family speaks one language and the child has a babysitter or attends a daycare where there is another language. Many parents will wonder if learning two languages will cause delays in their child's language development.

Two dictionaries to learn

Of course, being exposed to two languages means that the child will have to learn two sets of words and two sets of grammar. If learning one language is, in itself, quite an accomplishment, learning two might seem like an impossible task. But it is not. Many children learn two languages, or even three in some case.

What is a language?

When a child learns words, he does not categorize them into French words, English words, Spanish words, or such (especially since some words will even be shared in two languages). To the child, a word is basically "what you call this". If today, he hears mom call this object a "boat", that will be the label for it. Then, maybe tomorrow, he will hear dad call the same object "bateau", and the child will likely think there are simply two labels for this. Over time, the child will learn both labels, and they will add up in his vocabulary.

Isn't that confusing?

For the very young child who is exposed to two languages, it is no more confusing to learn two words like "boat" and "bateau" than it is to learn two different words in one language for the same thing like "carpet" and "rug". Would that be confusing? The child will quickly learn that there are many synonyms in any language.

Mixing words

Just the same as when the child could choose to use the word "carpet" or "rug" in one sentence, in the beginning, the child will likely use words indifferently from one or the other language, even in the same sentence. Is that a language problem? Not at all. It only means that the child has not yet categorized those words in arbitrary "dictionaries" like we do.

Fewer words in each language

The big concern for parents is often whether the child will have delays in his language development. Of course, if Grandma only speaks French and hears the child speak, she might feel he has a limited vocabulary because, in fact, many of his words are in another language that Grandma won't pick up. Looking at the language development with those categories is really giving an incomplete picture of the overall learning the child has done. If you were to look at the vocabulary of this bilingual child, you might count 28 words in English and 25 in French,

but that still adds up to 53 words in total. Is that in line with the number of words expected for a child that age, no matter the language used? If so, then the child is reaching the same milestones as others.

But my child does have delays already

Language delays can happen whether the child has to learn one language or more. If a child has difficulties pronouncing words, or learning new vocabulary, limiting the exposure to one language will not prevent the issue. And if a child already has development delays that will likely also affect his language, it will still be important for him to learn to communicate with both parents, or the extended family, won't it?

What should parents do?

In many cases, the bilingualism comes from two parents speaking two languages. In the old days, it was recommended that the parents picked one language and would only speak that language. This was not very efficient as it also meant that one parents might be using a language he or she was not that familiar with, having a limited vocabulary, and often speaking with a strong accent. All those were difficult for the parent, and not giving the best model to the child.

Then, came the “one parent, one language”, where each parent was asked to speak only their own language and not the other. Although this seems to make more sense, it is a rule that didn't really depict the reality around the child: one parent is likely bilingual and will likely speak both languages at different times, when conversing with different people.

In the end, the easiest way to address it is by being yourself. You might speak French with the child and then turn around and speak English with your spouse. Or when at the dinner table, conversing with others, you might choose to speak English because everyone understands English. That is ok. Bilingualism does not cause language delays in itself and delays can happen regardless of the languages he has to learn.

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