

Bilingualism

Facts

- **There are as many bilingual children as there are monolingual children worldwide** – Speaking more than one language is expected in many regions around the world and approximately 17.5% of Canadians speak at least two languages.
- **Learning more than one language does not cause language delay and does not confuse children** – It is possible that child who is exposed to more than one language may say their first words a bit later than a child who is exposed to only one language, though it is still expected to be within the range of what is considered normal (between 8-15 months). As bilingual children start combining words, their grammar is expected to develop at the same pace as monolingual children. Therefore, the milestones of language development are the same for bilingual children.
- **There are several advantages to being bilingual, especially in Canada** – Social advantages include more employment opportunities and a deeper connection to one's parent's language and culture. The most current research is also finding that knowing more than one language can help delay the effects of aging in the brain as well as sharpen some thinking skills such as attention and problem solving.
- **Mixing languages is expected** – It is considered normal for bilingual children to sometimes use two languages within the same sentence. It is called "code-switching" or "code-mixing." This fades with time as they come to understand the differences between the languages and which language to speak to which person. This mixing of languages can also be used into adulthood between bilingual speakers.
- **A variation of skills between languages is expected** – It is very rare that a child is equally skilled in two or more languages. It is expected that a person who is bilingual is more dominant in one language over another. This dominance can also shift throughout childhood and beyond, depending on exposure and use.
- **You do not need to stop speaking your home language for your child to learn the majority language** – In Niagara, the majority language is English. Some families in this region choose to speak only English at home even if it is not the parent's first language; because they feel this will help their children once they start school. There is actually no evidence that doing this is necessary for the child to become proficient in English. In fact, this places the child at greater risk of losing their parent's language.
- **A child with language delays can still be bilingual** – Even though research on this subject is limited, there is enough evidence that says a child who has delays will experience delays in all languages they use. We also know that there is no evidence that says that a child who has delays in vocabulary, grammar or conversational skills will make better or faster progress by limiting their exposure to only one language.



Suggestions

- **Talk about your plan** – Family members are encouraged to agree as to how children will be exposed to both languages. Some families use more structured approaches such as one parent-one language, agreeing on certain times of day or activities for each language, or keeping all activities in the house in the parent's main language. Many families do not choose one approach, but make extra efforts to expose the child to the non-English language. Whatever you choose to do, make sure the child is exposed to each language **as equally as possible** (research suggests that to develop skills in two languages, children need to be exposed to each language for 40-60% of their day), that they have **good models of each language**, and most importantly, that you do **what feels comfortable** for your family.
- **Read and sing songs and rhymes in both languages** – Expose your child to printed material in both languages. If you can't remember some of the songs from your youth, or songs your child may learn at school or daycare, look them up online. There are plenty in all languages.
- **Consult the same milestones as children who speak only one language** – If you are noticing that your bilingual child is not meeting communication milestones, consult with a speech-language pathologist.



Adapted from the following informative articles available online :

[Bilingualism in Young Children: Separating Fact from Fiction](#), by Lauren Lowry, Hanen Certified Speech-Language Pathologist
[Can Children with Language Impairments Learn Two Languages?](#), by Lauren Lowry, Hanen Certified Speech-Language Pathologist
[A Short Guide to Raising Children Bilingually](#), by Fred Genesee, McGill University, 2007