

Autism and bilingualism: Is bilingualism harmful for children with autism?

KEY POINTS

- 1 There have been very few research studies that have directly investigated the impact of bilingualism on children with autism.
- 2 The few studies done so far suggest that there is no reason not to use two languages to communicate with a child with autism.
- 3 Hearing or learning to speak two languages does not increase language delays [1], does not reduce the size of the child's vocabulary [2], and does not negatively affect how the child communicates with others [3].
- 4 Bilingualism may even be beneficial. Children with autism who are brought up hearing two languages may use more gestures and do more imaginative play that those brought up hearing one language [4]. But this evidence is still very preliminary.
- 5 Because of the lack of clear research findings, making the choice about whether to give a child with autism access to more than one language is very personal. Below are some issues you might like to consider.

Why use two languages?

Parents may find it easier to express themselves in their native language. Speaking this language might therefore help the parent to communicate well with their child and maintain a close relationship with them.

If the child is used to hearing a language other than English from their parent, it could be upsetting to switch to hearing them use English.

Understanding or speaking a little of the parent's native language may help the child relate to their wider family e.g. grandparents or siblings, and mean that they are not excluded from family occasions.

Speaking or understanding the parent's native language may help the child to understand their wider cultural heritage.

Speaking two languages could act as 'exercise' for the child's developing abilities e.g. thinking flexibly, learning about how other people think, thinking through instructions and expressing themselves more clearly.

Why use one language?

If the child gets additional support from a speech and language therapist or specialist classroom assistant in English, it may be hard to translate that learning into the home if English is not spoken.

If the child has a language delay they may still be passing through phases which bilingual children normally complete before starting school - things like using two languages in a sentence. This might make it harder for teachers to understand the child.

Parents might find it difficult to maintain two languages. They may wish to simplify their use of language by just using English to make things more straightforward at home for them as a family.

Parents may find it easier to express themselves in English, especially if they have lived in the UK for a long time or aren't confident in their second language.

The child's peer group at school / nursery, their community and their wider family may be predominantly English-speaking.



References

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It is designed as a quick-reference guide for parents and practitioners in the local community. It is based on research evidence and professional expertise. The guide is most relevant to families living in the UK in a mostly English-speaking environment who also have access to a second language – for example if they were raised in another country or had parents who spoke a language other than English.

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