



Culture In Context

Communication Development and Bilingualism

Although English is one of the most widely used languages in the world, nearly half of the world's population is bilingual. Speech and language development milestones look about the same across many different cultures and delays in earlier developing milestones, regardless of primary language, can be a good indicator of whether or not a child has a language delay. People often have misconceptions about what is best for the language development of a child who lives in a household where more than one language is being used.

Misconception – Teaching a child more than one language can cause a delay. Fact: Hearing more than one language at home does not cause a language delay. If a child who hears more than one language in the home demonstrates a language delay, it will show in both languages. No evidence exists to suggest that using more than one language in the home creates a language delay in children who are hearing more than one language.

Misconception – Using more than one language in the home can cause confusion for young children as their communication develops. Fact: Nearly half of the world's population is bilingual. Bilingual adults can switch between languages with no confusion. What might seem like confusion in children who are bilingual, mixing languages in the middle of a sentence or using different sentence structures, is actually something normal that even children who only speak one language do as they are learning language.

Misconception – People who use "broken" English are less intelligent than people who fluently speak the language. Fact: There are actually some social and cognitive benefits to learning more than one language. Studies have shown that preschoolers who are bilingual are better at reading body language, interpreting other's feelings, and understanding tone of voice. Studies also suggest that people who are bilingual are slightly better at switching between tasks and suppressing previously learned responses. These facts are important to consider when communicating with someone who is attempting to use a language other than his primary language because, even though he is using "broken" English, he is actually switching information between languages in his brain to communicate with you.

Misconception – Decreasing the number of languages in the home will increase the success of a child's communication development. Fact: This can actually cause more difficulties for a child. If parents are advised to only speak one language in the home, they may choose to speak less when the child is around, either because they want the child to be more proficient in a language they don't use or because they don't want to confuse the child. What we know is that children need to hear language all day long to learn language, so being quiet around the child is not ideal. That may, in fact, be a greater cause of a language delay. It is more important for a child to hear language than to limit the kind of language she is hearing.

Things to consider when meeting a child or an adult who is learning your language:

- No need to raise the volume of your voice unless you know of a documented hearing loss.
- Slightly slowing down your rate and pausing more often when you talk may be helpful.
- Understand that a child who is unfamiliar with you may not talk, due to shyness or a natural "silent period". That doesn't necessarily mean that the child can't talk.
- Try to learn a new word in the person's language to help the person feel less awkward or shy.

Resource: Byers-Heinlein, K., & Lew-Williams, C. (2013). Bilingualism in the Early Years: What the Science Says. *LEARNING landscapes*, 7(1), 95–112.