



Bilingualism

Educational Psychology Service & Speech and Language Therapy Service

This leaflet has been designed to support parents and educators of bilingual learners to understand bilingualism and how they can effectively support children who speak more than one language at home.

What is bilingualism?

Bilingualism is the ability to use or understand two or more languages. Having English as an additional language (EAL) means that English is learnt and used as a second language alongside another language that is used at home. Sometimes bilingual children know one language better than the other, this is called the **dominant language**. Over time, the dominant language may change, especially if a child doesn't use it regularly. Bilingual children may switch from one language to another mid-sentence or switch between sentences. This is common in bilingual communities as the child becomes aware of the different languages being used.








Is bilingualism a type of speech and language difficulty?

Bilingualism does not cause or contribute to speech, language, communication or feeding and swallowing disorders. Being able to communicate in two different languages is a great advantage and many children grow up learning more than one language without difficulty.



Being bilingual can help with:

-  Reinforcing and supporting language development in both languages
-  Reading and writing in both languages
-  Learning, attention and cognition
-  Developing a strong sense of self identity
-  Maintaining good relationships with families and communities

How can I tell if my bilingual child has a speech and language difficulty?

If your child is showing difficulty understanding or talking **both** languages they speak this could be a sign of a language disorder or speech sound difficulty and they may need support from a Speech and Language Therapist. You might see the following behaviours **across both languages**:

Difficulty following instructions

Struggling to form and use sentences

Trouble finding the right word to get their message across

Difficulty pronouncing some or lots of sounds across both languages

Remember if your child has difficulty with their second language (not their home language), this is a natural part of learning a new language and not a language disorder.

Supporting bilingual learners at home



Use your own language at home

Do not start speaking a language that you are not competent with, even though it is your child's new language (e.g. English). It is important to give your child a rich model of language by using the one you speak best.

(If both parents speak different languages to your child, it is natural to switch between the two languages, but keep key words and gestures the same to enforce consistency.)



Model correct use of new language

Use simple language with short phrases and lots of repetition when practicing use of a second language to provide your child with opportunity to hear the correct use of this language.



Use body language

Facial expressions and gestures can help to show your child what you are trying to say and/or what is expected of them.



Opportunity to practice

Allow your child opportunities to practice both languages in their own natural and social environments.



Allow silent periods

Your child may experience a silent period as they begin the process of acquiring a second language. This is a normal stage of second language acquisition, though it should not be for a long period of time.



Encourage communication

Show your child you are interested in what they are saying and encourage them to communicate with you.



Make communicating fun

Use stories, songs, nursery rhymes and games from any culture or language to encourage their language development.



Involve nursery/school

Ask if your child's nursery/school would be able to support your child with both languages to help develop their English language skills.

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