

A SOCIOCOGNITIVE MODEL OF BILINGUAL DEVELOPMENT AND PROBLEMS

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Abstract: *Languages are learned most readily during the toddler and preschool years and, to a lesser extent, during elementary school. Therefore, children growing up in bilingual homes or receiving bilingual education easily acquire both languages. Throughout much of the world, bilingualism is the norm for both children and adults. In the past, immigrants to English speaking countries often began learning and using English in their homes as soon as possible. In the early 2000s, however, many immigrants choose to maintain their native language at home. Bilingual children are at an advantage in this increasingly multilingual nation.*

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Language acquisition is very similar for monolingual and bilingual children, although some experts view bilingualism as a specialized case of **language development**. Children growing up in homes where two different languages are spoken usually acquire both languages simultaneously. Although their acquisition of each language may be somewhat slower than that of children who are acquiring a single language, their development in the two languages combined is equivalent to that of monolingual children. Bilingual language learners proceed through the same patterns of language and speech development as children acquiring a single language. Their first words usually are spoken at about one year of age, and they begin stringing two words together at about age two. Even if the two languages do not share similarities in pronunciation, children eventually master them both.

There are two major patterns of bilingual language development, both occurring before the age of three. **Simultaneous bilingualism** occurs when a child learns both languages at the same time. In the early stages of simultaneous

bilingual language development, a child may mix words, parts of words, and inflections from both languages in a single sentence. Sometimes this occurs because a child knows a word in one language but not in the other. Some bilingual children initially resist learning words for the same thing in two languages. Children also may experiment with their two languages for effect. During the second stage of bilingual language development, at age four or older, children gradually begin to distinguish between the two languages and use them separately, sometimes depending on where they are. One language may be used less formally to talk about home and family, whereas the other language may be used more formally, perhaps for relating events that took place outside the home. Often children find it easier to express a specific idea in one language rather than the other. Bilingual children also go through periods when one language is used more than the other. Some children may begin to prefer one language over the other, particularly if that language is spoken more frequently in their home or school. Bilingual children usually are not equally skilled in both languages. Often they understand more in one language but speak more in the other.

Sequential bilingualism occurs when children use their knowledge of and experience with a first language to rapidly acquire a second language. The first language may influence the way in which they learn and use their second language. Learning the second language is easier for children if the sounds, words, and vocabulary of the languages are similar.

Bilingual language development usually proceeds more smoothly when both languages are introduced early and simultaneously. When the parents each use a different language with their child, the child is less likely to experience language confusion. Researches indicate that there are numerous advantages to bilingualism. Bilingualism has been reported to improve the following skills:

- verbal and linguistic abilities
- general reasoning

- concept formation
- divergent thinking
- metalinguistic skills, the ability to analyze and talk about language and control language processing

These abilities are important for reading development in young children and may be a prerequisite for later learning to read and write in a new language.

Language delay

Language and learning difficulties occur with the same frequency in monolingual and bilingual children. However, as the number of bilingual children in the United States increases, it becomes increasingly important for parents and pediatricians to understand the normal patterns of bilingual language development in order to recognize abnormal language development in a bilingual child.

If a bilingual child has a speech or language problem, it should be apparent in both languages. However detecting language delays or abnormalities in bilingual children can be difficult. Signs of possible **language delay** in bilingual children include the following:

- not making sounds between two and six months of age
- fewer than one new word per week in children aged six to 15 months
- fewer than 20 words in the two languages combined by 20 months of age
- limited vocabulary without word combinations in children aged two to three years of age
- prolonged periods without using speech
- difficulty remembering words
- missing normal milestones of language development in the first language of a sequentially bilingual child

Language development in bilingual children can be assessed by a bilingual speech/language pathologist or by a professional who has knowledge of the rules and structure of both languages, perhaps with the assistance of a translator or interpreter.

Parents in bilingual households can help their children by taking the following steps:

- speaking the language in which they are most comfortable
- being consistent regarding how and with whom they use each language
- using each language's grammar in a manner that is appropriate for the child's developmental stage
- keeping children interested and motivated in language acquisition

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