

Topic 8

CHILDHOOD BILINGUALISM: SIX COMMON MYTHS

Children who walk in two language worlds enjoy personal, social, cognitive and linguistic benefits. For this reason debunking childhood bilingualism myths is important. Each myth presented below is followed by a debunker, a *research check* that exposes the falseness and untruth of commonly held views about children's dual language learning.

MYTH 1: Bilingualism will delay language acquisition in children.

Research check

This myth has been around for a very long time. Yet numerous research studies have shown that bilingual children are *not* delayed in their language acquisition. Normally developing children who navigate two languages are, in most areas of language acquisition no different than their monolingual peers. One difference can be the rate of their dual language acquisition.

MYTH 2: Young children learn a second language with ease. They require no support because they simply “soak” up languages.

Research check

Young children are not language sponges. To learn a second or additional language they require a language-rich environment and meaningful interactions with the special people in their lives.

MYTH 3: Learning two languages is confusing to children.

Research check

All normally developing children can learn and navigate more than one language. The confusion, most often, lies with the parents who are anxious and unsure about children's additional or dual language learning.

MYTH 4: The one person - one language approach is best to help children become bilingual.

Research check

The one person - one language strategy, where one parent speaks one language and the other parent speaks the other, is only one of many bilingual strategies parents adopt in the language maintenance attempts. Here are six more:

- one language is used in the home and the other outside the home;
- each room in the house is assigned a language;
- children choose the language of the dinner table;
- families socialize with those who speak the same home language;
- babysitters who are speakers of the same home language spend time with the children, and
- home language books and songs are shared with children on a daily basis.

Many parents report that the strategy that best helps maintain the home language, usually the weaker one, is to assign it as the language to be spoken by all family members in the home.

MYTH 5: Using the home language will hinder children's progress in the school language.

Research check

The opposite is true. Many of the skills children develop in the home language can be transferred to the new language.

MYTH 6: Children raised bilingual will always mix their languages.

Research check

Like all bilinguals, bilingual children mix languages strategically. Their sensitivity to language and communicative contexts guides their language choices. They use both languages with bilinguals, but not with single language speakers.

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