

DUAL LANGUAGE LEARNERS: FIVE TIPS FOR PARENTS

Parents with limited English proficiency have heard different messages about the language-learning needs of their children.¹ Some believe that speaking to their children in their native language may hold them back from learning English or confuse them as they enter preschool and kindergarten.

Yet, new research from brain scientists and linguistic experts tells us that a child who learns many words in her native language will have a stronger foundation for learning a second language, like English.² Studies also show that exposing a child to two languages during their preschool years may help them learn more efficiently as they grow.³

In fact, exposing children to lots of words early on, regardless of the language, is the best way to prepare them for the future. In the earliest years, children's brains are able to distinguish between, sort, and understand sounds associated with different languages.⁴ This begins with the processing of sounds and information in the womb,⁵ and continues as language networks form and grow in the brain. Repeated use of these networks creates the essential building blocks for lifelong language learning.⁶

Parents or caregivers who do not speak English, but who are eager for their children to thrive in the American educational system, can benefit from this new research. Tips from the research include:



- 1. Talk, read, sing, and play with your child often – in both your native language as well as other languages you know.** Talking directly with a child is the surest way to help them build their early vocabulary. In fact, researchers at Stanford University found that the amount of talk directed at a child predicted the size of their vocabulary as early as 24 months.⁷
- 2. Know that if you speak a language other than English at home, it's normal for your child to start out slowly learning English. With time and attention, they'll match their peers.** Early language learning is complex – under any circumstance – and your child will be working to store two languages at once. It will take time for them to begin sorting out and using new words they learn from friends and teachers in preschool with the words they learn at home.⁸ By helping your child build their vocabulary in the language of your home, their young minds will be ready to learn new languages. Research has even found that dual language learning children have similarly-sized vocabularies, but spread over two languages, and that many early differences in speech can fade with time.⁹
- 3. Be proud.** Children raised in households that speak a language other than English are lucky. Research has shown that children who learn two languages display greater concentration, have a better grasp on the basic structure of language, and may have an easier time understanding math and science symbols later on in school.¹⁰ In fact, strong evidence suggests that when it comes time for your child to learn English, they'll be better at it with a strong foundation in their native language.¹¹
- 4. Visit your public library as often as you can.** Local library branches often have children's books in Spanish, as well English related materials for the whole family. If you or a caregiver you know does not read in English, find books to read aloud in your home language. If books are not available, talk to your librarian.

- 5. Follow-up classroom or caregiver learning by reading and conversing with your child in your preferred language.** Point out words that match some of the new English words that your child may be hearing that share similar roots – such as *August* and *Agosto* or *plant* and *planta*. This process will reinforce their new language skills while showing them how much they may already naturally understand, boosting confidence and learning at the same time.¹²

Parents who are not proficient in English may feel stress and anxiety about their children’s language skills. But it is becoming increasingly clear that there are many advantages to growing up bilingual. Parents who talk, read, sing, and play with their children – often and in the languages they know best – will prepare them for success in preschool, elementary school, and beyond.

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ENDNOTES

- 1 Linda Espinosa, “PreK-3rd: Challenging Common Myths About Dual Language Learners,” (New York: Foundation for Child Development, 2013) and Annick De Hower, *An Introduction to Bilingual Development* (New York: Multilingual Matters, 2009).
- 2 L. Quentin Dixon and others, “What we Know About Second Language Acquisition: A Synthesis from Four Perspectives,” *Review of Educational Research* 82 (1) (2012): 5-60.
- 3 Catherine Sandhofer and Yuuko Uchikoshi, Cognitive Consequences of Dual Language Learning: Cognitive Function, Language and Literacy, Science and Mathematics, and Social-Emotional Development.” In Faye Ong and John McLean, eds., *California’s Best Practices for Young Dual Language Learners* (California Department of Education, State Advisory Council on Early Learning and Care, 2013).
- 4 Patricia Kuhl, “Early Language Learning and Literacy: Neuroscience Implications for Education,” *International Mind, Brain, and Education Society* 5 (3) (2011): pp 128-142.
- 5 Barbara Conboy, “Neuroscience Research: How Experience with One of More Languages Affects the Developing Brain.” In Faye Ong and John McLean, eds., *California’s Best Practices for Young Dual Language Learners* (California Department of Education, State Advisory Council on Early Learning and Care, 2013).
- 6 Patricia Kuhl, *Id.*
- 7 Adrianna Weisleder and Anne Fernald, “Talking to Children Matters: Early Language Experience Strengthens Processing and Builds Vocabulary,” *Psychological Science* (2013).
- 8 Barbara Conboy, *Id.*
- 9 Barbara Pearson and others, “The Relation of Input Factors to Lexical Learning by Bilingual Toddlers.” *Applied Psycholinguistics* 18 (1997):41–58.
- 10 Ellen Bialystok, “Levels of Bilingualism and Levels of Linguistic Awareness,” *Developmental Psychology*, 24 (4) (1988):560-567 and Raluca Barac and Ellen Bialystok, *Cognitive Development of Young Bilingual Children: A Review of the Literature* (Under Review, 2013).
- 11 L. Quentin Dixon and others, *Id.*
- 12 Linda Espinosa, *Id.*