

When do Bilingual and Multilingual Children Start Speaking?

Multilingual Living Magazine's July-August 2007 Drawing (www.biculturalfamily.org/drawing.html) asked people around the world their answer to the question "When do bilingual and multilingual children first start to speak?"

The answers we offered were:

- (1) Earlier than monolingual children
- (2) Later than monolingual children
- (3) Around the same time as monolingual children

and we asked everyone to explain why they answered the way they did.

The results?

54% answered #3 (at the same time),
31% answered #2 (later),
and 15% answered #3 (earlier).

What do the experts have to say about this? Read both the answers from YOU as well as the answers from EXPERTS on the following pages. You might be surprised!

THANK YOU everyone for your fabulous answers! And congratulations to our July-August drawing winners:

Bee in Sweden
Brooke in Massachusetts, USA
Annie in California, USA



I believe that bilingual children don't necessarily start speaking later than monolingual. My older son started speaking later than his peers and he was raised monolingual. My second son is also a bit behind compared to his peers (he is bilingual) but I don't think it is only due to him being bilingual maybe its a genetic issue our case :)

-Dorothy, Hungary

I have several times observed that bilingual children begin to speak a little later, but once they start they catch up very quickly.

-Elizabeth, USA

On average, research shows that bilingual children start speaking around the same time as monolingual children. What people might find interesting is that children start signing earlier than they start speaking (monolinguals and bilinguals).

-Georgina, The Netherlands

None of the above! Bilingual children are as individual as monolingual children in their language development, including onset of speech. Why do I know this? First I taught bilingual preschoolers for many years after teaching monolingual preschoolers. Then I had two bilingual children myself. One started very early and was/is very advanced in both languages. The other started later and has always mixed more than the first. I saw a whole range of linguistic abilities in the bilingual and trilingual children I taught before I had my own. So, my answer is, none of the above!

-Bee, Sweden

Not only do bilingual children speak earlier but they also read with greater fluency and comprehension- I have a seven year old who is in a dual immersion program (English/Spanish) - I speak English, his father speaks Igbo- there are a lot of languages in his environment- but because of his exposure to so many languages and cultures, he is actually excelling. He is entering a multi-level class in the fall with 3rd and 4th grade students and is one of the youngest at 7 years old and also one of the top students in the class. So, reflecting on the time when he started speaking, at 8 months, I really believe that bilingual children start speaking earlier than monolingual children.

-Carmen, USA



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My sense is all children start speaking at their own time anyway. But all things being equal, presenting a child with 3 languages (the case of our son Thomas) means they will learn a similar amount of words then a monolingual child but that takes longer to translate into full sentences in each language. So they basically learn first what's more important to them and when they know a word, they typically learn it in all the languages they are exposed to roughly at the same time but that is what takes time away from learning more words from one language - resulting in a child taking longer to form full sentences in each language that he is exposed to. I believe that once they get the syntax of each language right then they will learn the rest of their vocabulary very fast. It's the early stages that are the toughest!

-Catherine, UK

A particular problem that illustrates the wrongly attributed link between bilingualism and developmental problems is 'language delay'. Language delay occurs when a child is very late in beginning to talk, or lags well behind peers in language development. [...] Parents of bilingual children with such problems should not believe bilingualism is the cause. Sometimes, well-meaning professionals make this diagnosis. Having a bilingual background is widely believed to produce language delayed children. The evidence does not support this belief.

-Colin Baker,

*from the new third edition of **A Parents' and Teachers' Guide to Bilingualism** (Multilingual Matters 2007).*

It really depends on the child! There is no answer to this question, there are children that are monolinguals and speak at 4 and there are trilinguals and quadrilinguals that speak at 12 months. It's all about how exposed the child is to speech (remember most parents are tired already by the time they are home from work and having a conversation with a toddler is the last thing on their mind), if the child is the hearing type - and not visual for example, it also depends on the child's maturity/intelligence (some children are more advanced than others, premature children are usually slower learners for example).. It's all relevant really. Paddy started speaking

at 2 1/2 and Erin is 21mts old and only says a few words WHEN she feels like it, whereas Lorraine's bilingual kids were active speakers at the age of 2. I don't think we have done anything less than Lorraine and Mark have done, but still 3 of her children spoke earlier than my 2.

-Clare, Greece

At the same time as monolingual children. As I have observed among my friend's monolingual children, they are almost at the same level of ability to speak as my little daughter who is raised bilingually. Also, in most books/publications, I've read, they say bilingual children tend to start speaking at the same time as monolingual ones, with one major difference - the amount of words in their dictionary. It's as big as their monolingual friends' but the actual amount of words spoken is divided by two. Why? Well, since children at a certain age are capable of learning only a certain amount of words, and since bilingual children learn two different words to name one thing (one in each of the two languages), their vocabulary in each of the languages is half as big as it is with monolingual children.

-Czelaw, Poland

It depends! Before answering your question, one may ask: how do we define the "start of speaking" and how do we decide "in which language" does the child start speaking? I believe research has not yet found the answer to your question, but there are plenty of "myths" or stereotypes. A myth my husband and I were aware of, was that bilingual children start to speak later than monolinguals, so 5 years ago I would have answered "later" to your question. That is why we were very surprised when our daughter Maya, now 5, started saying words at 10 months and progressed rapidly to a vocabulary of 150 words (in English and Spanish) at 16 months. With the limited data I have now, I believe that bilingual and multilingual children are no different in their onset of speech, and I think researchers may find it difficult to produce evidence to the contrary.

-Isabel, USA

At the same time as monolingual children. Though it is often said that bilingual children speak later than monolingual children, my personal experience with my children (who are being raised speaking German and English) has not confirmed this. Both of my son's uttered their first words very early (seven or eight months) and continued with

There is an old myth that bilingualism will delay language acquisition in children. In fact, there is no evidence that bilingual children will start speaking sooner, or later, than monolingual children. As human communicators, both types of children will develop language at the same rate. In both groups, some will be faster than their peers, and some slower. This said, one should keep in mind that children acquiring two languages simultaneously are linguistically different from monolingual children, if only that they have to deal with two (or more) languages. Thus, their actual language production (e.g. with the use of code-switches and borrowings) may be different from their monolingual peers. And, of course, depending on the relative strength of their languages, one may develop at a different rate than the other(s). But these difference do not apply to the onset of language as such.

-François Grosjean,

author of **Life with Two Languages (HUP).**

Visit his new website at: www.francoisgrosjean.ch

their language development nicely. It seems that if a child is bilingual people jump to the conclusion that delay in starting to speak is due to being exposed to two languages. However, it might just be that the child would have been slightly slower in learning to speak if he/she would have been raised with only one language.

-Isabelle, USA

Multilingual children tend to speak a little later than their peers. Although there is no solid scientific evidence to suggest a delay in speech, anecdotally there is a real sense among parents that multilinguals start talking three to six months later than monolingual children.

-Kat, UK

Parents are often concerned that raising children in two languages will result in delays in learning – they will start to speak later than monolingual children or they will start to form sentences later than monolinguals. This fear seems to be based on the simple logic that learning two things at the same time is harder than learner one and, therefore, it will take bilingual children longer to sort things out and start using language. This fear may also be based on the observation that most bilingual children have smaller vocabularies in each language than monolingual children during the early stages of development and this, it is thought reflects the added burden of learning two languages at the same time. It is true that when you examine each language at a time, bilingual children have smaller vocabularies in each language. But, a very different picture often emerges when you examine what is called “conceptual vocabulary” – how many words in either language the child knows to refer to different objects, ideas, qualities (cat, fun, red, for example). In this case, bilingual children usually have the same size vocabularies, or even larger, than monolingual children.

It is also true that some bilingual children may in fact be delayed in starting to use one of their languages if they do not get sufficient exposure to and input in that language. For example, if a child is learning English and Spanish at the same time and the source of Spanish in the family is a parent who works away from home – in a different city, and is not home very much, then this child might indeed start to use single words or simple sentences later than a monolingual child. None of these scenarios, however, mean that learning two languages is harder than using one and, therefore, results in certain costs to the child. They mean that learning two languages at the same time is different from learning one and that parents need to be conscientious and ensure that their child gets lots of exposure to both languages.”

- Fred Genesee

McGill University, Montreal Quebec

www.psych.mcgill.ca/faculty/genesee.html

There are many studies that indicate that bilingual children do not take more time to start speaking. General thinking was that it should take longer as they are learning 2 languages. Children are very good at differentiating between 2 languages and more. It is more a question on when the child is ready to speak than a question of how many languages he/she will speak.

-Paula, USA

Earlier. I seem to recall that there is research that shows that infants who are more often spoken and responded to in adult language tend to start speaking earlier than children not spoken to as often. My guess is that children in a multilingual environment are spoken to more often than those in a monolingual environment, perhaps simply due to greater linguistic awareness in the multilingual environment. Hence my conclusion.

-Ranjeet, USA

Bilingual children do not speak later than monolingual children. My youngest is right on target with average language acquisition, while my oldest was WAY above average (almost 75 words by 18 months, first full sentence at 19 1/2 months, and she hasn't stopped talking since!) I have read research that suggests that children exposed to more than one language start speaking SLIGHTLY later than children exposed to only one language. However, it must be noted that research also shows that boys start speaking later than girls, and that the gap between average age of monolinguals versus multilinguals is SMALLER than the gap between girls and boys. Additionally, it should be noted that children being raised with more than one language still start speaking within the normal range for language development. I meet many people who express concern that exposing their children to more than one

language will cause a language DELAY, but in talking with our pediatrician and friends who are bilingual speech language therapists I believe that this is a MYTH, and we shouldn't be discouraged from giving a tremendously enriching gift to our children. If a child has a language delay, they will have it whether they are being raised in one language, or in three languages. As a good friend of mine once told me (she is raising her two children bilingually in Italian & English): "If my speaking Italian to them means that they start talking slightly later than the average, WHO CARES? If they end up to be bilingual in the end I don't mind waiting another couple of weeks to hear their words!"

I salute all of you families out there that are seeking to provide your children with the ability to communicate in more than one language. I believe that we are all contributing to a better world!

-Martha, USA

Hi, I was born and raised in Slovakia and that's where my family currently resides. My husband is Canadian and only knows and speaks English. We have a 2 year old daughter Mia. She was born in England and we lived there until she was about 19 months. I have read in many places that for a bilingual family, it is best to keep to some sort of consistency, whether it is each parent speaking their native tongue or speaking one language at home and the other in public. While I like the idea in theory, I am finding reality to be much more challenging. At home, for me to speak only Slovak means that my husband can't understand what I am communicating to our child. So it means I often mix Slovak and English, depending on the people surrounding me. And in public, it works in similar ways.

I have also heard a myth about bilingual kids speaking later than monolinguals. My experience? From the short time of parenting Mia, I am not worried at ALL. She started using words and language at a very early age and in fact many people comment on her ability and advancement in language. And as far as confusing our daughter by not consistently sticking to one of the earlier mentioned rules...I am confident she will eventually be able to separate the two languages she's learning. Already, she knows how to translate some words into the other language and switches from English to Slovak and vice versa, depending on whom she's conversing with.

So while I believe these suggestions are fantastic pointers and help when they work in one's situation, I also think that as someone else mentioned before - adapt what works for you and go with it!

- Anna ❖

Thank you everyone for your fabulous answers to our Drawing question! Make sure to enter Multilingual Living Magazine Drawings on our website: www.biculturalfamily.org/drawing.html.

Young bilinguals and monolinguals do exactly the same things with their language(s) at the same time and in the same way. They start by babbling sounds and speech melody, then they produce one-word utterances, and then they produce utterances with more than one word. All stumble with the pronunciation of difficult sounds or the expression of complex meanings, all hesitate and stammer in their eagerness to say long or short utterances, prattle non-stop (including nonsense), or keep mostly quiet to let language grow within themselves at their own individual pace. All the while, they play endlessly with their language(s) to check how bits and pieces of each one fit together, which word with which word, or which language with which language, and so train both muscles and mind in order to become expert users.

- Madalena Cruz-Ferreira

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