

The Benefits of Being Bilingual

Head Start currently serves more than 300,000 children who are dual language learners (DLLs) in 87.4 percent of its classrooms (Office of Head Start, 2011). This document lists some reasons bilingualism is an asset to individuals, families, and our entire society. Head Start staff can share the benefits of bilingualism with families, find ways to support children's home languages, and encourage families to keep their language strong.



Benefits: An Overview

Cognitive



Individuals who are bilingual switch between two different language systems. Their brains are very active and flexible (Zelasko and Antunez, 2000). Research also shows that bilingual people have an easier time

- understanding math concepts and solving word problems more easily (Zelasko and Antunez, 2000);
- developing strong thinking skills (Kessler and Quinn, 1980);
- using logic (Bialystok and Majumder, as cited in Castro, Ayankoya, & Kasprzak, 2011);
- focusing, remembering, and making decisions (Bialystok, 2001);
- thinking about language (Castro et al., 2011); and
- learning other languages (Jessner, 2008).

In addition, research indicates that bilingualism may delay the onset of Alzheimer's disease (Dreifus, 2011).

Social-Emotional



Becoming bilingual supports children to maintain strong ties with their

- entire family,
- culture, and
- community.

All of these are key parts of children's developing identity (Zelasko and Antunez, 2000). Bilingual children are also able to make new friends and create strong relationships in their second language—an important personal skill in our increasingly diverse society.

Finally, recent research has also found that children raised in bilingual households show better self-control (Kovács and Mehler, 2009), which is a key indicator of school success.

Learning



School readiness and success for children who are dual language learners (DLLs) is tied directly to mastery of their home language (Zelasko and Antunez, 2000).

Bilingual children benefit academically in many ways. Because they are able to switch between languages, they develop more flexible approaches to thinking through problems. Their ability to read and think in two different languages promotes higher levels of abstract thought, which is critically important in learning (Diaz, 1985).

The list of benefits of bilingualism is constantly growing. Current research shows that people who use more than one language appear better at ignoring irrelevant information, a benefit that seems to exist as early as seven months of age (Kovács and Mehler, 2009). Thinking in a second language frees people from biases and limited thinking (Keysar, Hayakawa, & An, 2011).

Children who learn to read in their home language have a strong foundation to build upon when they learn a second language. They can easily transfer their knowledge about reading to their second language (Páez and Rinaldi, 2006).

Global



One-half to two-thirds of adults around the world speak at least two languages (Zelasko and Antunez, 2000). In our global society, they have many advantages. Bilingual adults have more job opportunities around the world than monolingual adults (Zelasko and Antunez, 2000). Research shows that they also earn an average of \$7,000 more per year than their monolingual peers (Fradd, 2000).

Bilingual individuals have the opportunity to

- participate in the global community in more ways,
- get information from more places, and
- learn more about people from other cultures.

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