

BRILLIANT BILINGUAL BABIES

Babies are remarkably good at learning languages in their first year of life. A solid foundation in a child's home language is key to later language success. Learning more than one language has many benefits!

THE TAKE HOME:

1. Home language is the foundation for children who are dual language learners.
2. Bilingual and monolingual children learn at the same pace.
3. Being bilingual has cognitive benefits.



WHAT DOES RESEARCH SAY?

- **Home language is the foundation.** It is important for babies to hear lots of rich language in their first year of life. It does not matter what language is a child's first language. A strong foundation in children's home language enables other language learning later on.
- When assessed across all the languages they know, studies show that **bilingual and monolingual children learn at the same pace.** In other words, children who are learning more than one language hit milestones such as learning vocabulary, combining words, and forming sentences at the same times as children learning one language.
- **Learning more than one language has brainy benefits.** When listening to language sounds, bilingual children have higher activity in the prefrontal cortex area of the brain. This area is important for cognitive skills like working memory, directing attention, and impulse inhibition. Other studies show that bilingual children are better at thinking flexibly. These skills can lead to improved mental health and academic outcomes later in life.



WHAT DOES IT LOOK LIKE?

- You might notice that children learning more than one language are a diverse group. Some children learn two languages from birth. Others learn a home language and begin learning a second language in school. No two bilingual children have the same story!
- You can use cultural practices as a way to support home language growth. For infants, tell stories and sing songs in your home language. Notice how infants respond to whatever language or languages are familiar.
- Be on the lookout for children's attempts to communicate with you. Infants will use mostly nonverbal methods, like pointing and gestures. Toddlers may not have the English abilities of some of their peers yet, but this does not mean they have learning delays. How can you tell that they are communicating?
- Older children who are bilingual will sometimes use both languages in the same sentence. This is called code mixing and it is a sign of language mastery! This tells us that children are using whatever language resources they have to communicate.



TRY THIS!

- Talk to babies a lot and early—well before the baby starts talking back. Don't simplify your language for dual language learners. Encourage families to speak to children in their home language from birth. Model language by using full and complex sentences.
- Notice how attuned babies are to the words you are using. When do they respond and seem the most interested? Does your voice take on a higher pitch and transform into a sing-song tone? This is called “parentese.” It helps children focus on you and it leads to later language development.
- How do you have a conversation with an infant, or child that does not yet speak your language? When you say something and pause, they will respond with a noise or an action, a babble, or an action. Help parents recognize when they should talk, how, and how to support back and forth interactions in a “conversation” with their child.
- You can help parents understand that knowing two or more languages is a special cognitive skill. Demonstrate what problem solving looks like in infancy. Perhaps the baby can get cereal out of a cup, or pull a blanket to reach a toy.
- Make sure that screenings and assessments are conducted in all of the languages a child knows. This will accurately reflect their language knowledge.
- Cognitive flexibility is naturally built by a bilingual experience, but everyone can practice these skills. Try sorting laundry first by color and then by item. Switching rules over time helps children think flexibly. Try games that ask children to practice controlling their impulses, like Simon Says and Red Light, Green Light.

LEARN MORE:

DUAL LANGUAGE LEARNERS TOOLKIT

<https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/culture-language/article/dual-language-learners-toolkit>

STRATEGIES FOR SUPPORTING ALL DUAL LANGUAGE LEARNERS

<https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/pdf/dll-strategies.pdf>

CONNECTING AT HOME

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CONNECT

It's never too early to help your child build their cultural identity. What brings your family together – birthdays, weekly dinners, or celebrations? Involve your infant and toddler in these events. Let your child meet other people who speak your home language.

MODEL LANGUAGE

Infants need to hear language to learn language. Speak to your infant in whatever language you feel most comfortable. Use full sentences and real words, but vary your pitch to keep infants interested. As they hear language, they are getting ready to speak.

HAVE A CONVERSATION

When you speak to your infant, pause to let them respond. Then respond back to them. Keep the cycle going! This back-and-forth interaction becomes a little conversation. As children get older, encourage them to communicate, no matter what language they use.

PRACTICE PROBLEM SOLVING

Solving problems is an important skill for children of all ages. Children who are bilingual often find more creative solutions to problems. How does your infant get a toy that is out of reach? Do they use another toy to pull it closer? Allow your infant to solve some problems by themselves. You can always help if they become upset or frustrated.

