

Dual Language Learners



Primed and Ready to Learn

Growing Up as a Dual Language Learner

For an adult, trying to learn a second language can be a difficult task. Young children have a much easier time learning languages than adults. They learn language by having ample opportunities to hear speech from adults and peers. They also learn by practicing words and phrases.

When children begin speaking multiple languages, they may use words from both languages. For instance, a Spanish-English dual language learner might say, “I want la taza (cup)!” Some adults may take this as evidence that using two languages confuses children. On the contrary! Using words from both languages is called *code switching*. It can occur in a variety of situations. For instance, children may substitute a word from another language if they don’t know the word in the language they are speaking. Other times, children change what language they use based on who they’re speaking with, or to emphasize a particular word. It’s a smart strategy that helps them express themselves as they “decode” multiple languages.

Language Development Trajectories

Whether children are monolingual or multilingual, their language learning typically follows the same trajectory. After children speak their first words, they begin to combine two or three words to form phrases. The next step is using full sentences. Children immersed in two languages from birth tend to reach these milestones at the same time. Children who learn a second language at a later point may reach these milestones for their second language months or years later. This is the natural progression for dual language learners.

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Parents, teachers, and other caregivers support children’s budding vocabulary. They may show concern that dual language learners sometimes appear to know fewer words compared to their monolingual peers. According to research, that’s not the case - vocabulary growth for monolinguals and bilinguals is similar over time. A bilingual’s vocabulary may appear smaller if you consider only one of their languages! But their vocabulary actually stretches across two languages. Over the lifespan, bilinguals often have larger vocabularies than monolinguals.

Try This:

- **Create an inviting environment.** Make sure to select toys that reflect children’s culture and language(s). As children are learning and speaking two languages, they may feel shy or even embarrassed about their home language or culture. If children want to talk in their home language or about cultural experiences, encourage them and invite them to share. If children don't feel comfortable sharing, honor their wishes by not singling them out.
- **Help build vocabulary in both languages for dual language learners.** When children code switch, name the object in the dual language learner’s other language (if you know it)! For example, if a child says, “Look, el gato,” you can say, “Yes, that’s a cat!”

Learn More:

Language Modeling & Conversations Tips for Teachers: Dual Language Learners
<https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/hslc/tta-system/teaching/docs/conversations-teach-tips-dll.pdf>

Code Switching: Why It Matters and How to Respond
<https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/hslc/tta-system/cultural-linguistic/code-switching.html>



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