

Children exposed to multiple languages may be better natural communicators

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This image shows the game the study participants played. The monolingual children moved the correct object about 50 percent of the time. But mere exposure to another language improved children's ability to understand the adult's perspective and select the correct objects. The children in the exposure group selected correctly 76 percent of the time, and the bilingual group took the adult's perspective in the game correctly 77 percent of the time.

Young children who hear more than one language spoken at home become better communicators, a new study from University of Chicago psychologists finds. Effective communication requires the ability to take others' perspectives. Researchers discovered that children from multilingual environments are better at interpreting a speaker's meaning

than children who are exposed only to their native tongue. The most novel finding is that the children do not even have to be bilingual themselves; it is the exposure to more than one language that is the key for building effective social communication skills.

Previous studies have examined the effects of being bilingual on cognitive development. This study, published online May 8 by the journal *Psychological Science*, is the first to demonstrate the social benefits of just being exposed to multiple languages.

"Children in multilingual environments have extensive social practice in monitoring who speaks what to whom, and observing the social patterns and allegiances that are formed based on [language](#) usage," explained Katherine Kinzler, associate professor of psychology and an expert on language and social development. "These early socio-linguistic experiences could hone children's skills at taking other people's perspectives and provide them tools for effective [communication](#)."

Study co-author Boaz Keysar, professor of psychology and an internationally known expert on communication and cognition, said this study is part of a bigger research program that attempts to explain how humans learn to communicate. "Children are really good at acquiring language. They master the vocabulary and the syntax of the language, but they need more tools to be effective communicators," said Keysar. "A lot of communication is about perspective taking, which is what our study measures."

Keysar, Kinzler and their co-authors, doctoral students in psychology Samantha Fan and Zoe Liberman, had 72 4- to 6- year- old children participate in a social communication task. The children were from one of three language backgrounds: monolinguals (children who heard and spoke only English and had little experience with other languages); exposures (children who primarily heard and spoke English, but they had

some regular exposure to speakers of another language); and bilinguals (children who were exposed to two languages on a regular basis and were able to speak and understand both languages). There were 24 children in each group.

Each child who participated sat on one side of a table across from an adult and played a communication game that required moving objects in a grid. The child was able to see all of the objects, but the adult on the other side of the grid had some squares blocked and could not see all the objects. To make sure that children understood that the adult could not see everything, the child first played the game from the adult's side.

For the critical test, the adult would ask the child to move an object in the grid. For example, she would say, "I see a small car, could you move the small car?" The child could see three cars: small, medium and large. The adult, however, could only see two cars: the medium and the large ones. To correctly interpret the adult's intended meaning, the child would have to take into account that the adult could not see the smallest car, and move the one that the adult actually intended—the medium car.

The monolingual children were not as good at understanding the adult's intended meaning in this game, as they moved the correct object only about 50 percent of the time. But mere exposure to another language improved children's ability to understand the adult's perspective and select the correct objects. The children in the exposure group selected correctly 76 percent of the time, and the bilingual group took the adult's perspective in the game correctly 77 percent of the time.

"Language is social," noted Fan. "Being exposed to multiple languages gives you a very different social experience, which could help children develop more effective [communication skills](#)."

Liberman added, "Our discovery has important policy implications, for

instance it suggests previously unrealized advantages for bilingual education."

Some parents seem wary of second-language exposure for their [young children](#), Kinzler commented. Yet, in addition to learning another language, their [children](#) might unintentionally be getting intensive training in perspective taking, which could make them better communicators in any language.

Provided by University of Chicago

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