

What clinicians need to know about bilingual development in children

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Erika Hoff, Ph.D., a professor of psychology in the Charles E. Schmidt College of Science at Florida Atlantic University, pictured with a young child, provides important information on what clinicians need to know about bilingual development in children. Credit: Florida Atlantic University

Bilingual children pose unique challenges for clinicians, and, until recently, there was little research on young bilinguals to guide clinical practice. In the past decade, however, research on bilingual development has burgeoned, and the scientific literature now supports several conclusions that should help clinicians as they assess bilingual children and advise their parents.

In an article recently published in *Seminars in Speech and Language*, Erika Hoff, Ph.D., a professor of psychology in the Charles E. Schmidt College of Science at Florida Atlantic University, provides important information on what clinicians need to know about bilingual development in [children](#).

"Two difficult jobs fall to clinicians who see bilingual children. One is the diagnosis of [language](#) impairment; the other is providing counsel to parents who worry about the consequences of the bilingual experience for their children's language development," said Hoff. "The diagnostic job is complicated because it is particularly difficult to steer a course between overdiagnosing or underdiagnosing [language impairment](#) when the client is a bilingual child."

Overdiagnosis happens when a bilingual child scores below the average on tests designed for monolingual children and the clinician interprets the score without taking into account the fact that only a portion of the bilingual child's language knowledge is represented in that score. Underdiagnosis happens when a bilingual child scores below monolingual norms and the clinician overcorrects for the child's bilingualism, thereby failing to identify a child whose ability to acquire language is truly impaired.

"The problem is knowing how much to correct for the child's exposure to another language, and that problem is especially difficult because the amount of exposure to another language varies among bilingual

children," said Hoff.

According to Hoff, there is a widely held but mistaken belief that children's ability to acquire language is such that once they get to school they will quickly reach the same level of English proficiency as their monolingual classmates, and therefore early exposure to English is not necessary. To the contrary, the data are clear that poor English skills at school entry now place a child at risk for school failure. The second widely held belief, which requires qualification, is that immigrant parents will help their children best by speaking English to them. The data are clear that language input provided by nonnative speakers is less supportive of language development than input provided by native speakers.

The data also show that in a home in which both parents are native speakers of Spanish, the negative effect of English use on children's Spanish skills is greater than the positive effect of English use on children's English skills.

"The data are clear than an optimal environment for English language development is exposure rich, grammatically varied English of the sort that is characteristic of educated, native English speakers. Clinicians can provide minority language-speaking parents with this information, but providing all children access to such language experience will require involvement of larger institutions," said Hoff. "For example, preschool programs are an opportunity for all children to experience a rich language environment, but the preschool programs need to be of high quality in order for children to show language gains as a result of preschool attendance."

Conclusions on bilingual development of children in Hoff's article reveal that:

- Dual language input does not confuse children; they can learn two languages at the same time;
- It is not necessary for the two languages to be kept separate in children's experience in order for children to acquire two languages without confusion;
- Learning two languages takes longer than learning one; it is normal for bilingual children to lag behind monolingual children in their rate of single [language development](#), and it takes a long time to catch up;
- A dominant language is not equivalent to an only language; bilingual children often score within the normal range for [monolingual children](#) in their dominant language, but they still are not performing as well as they would if they were hearing and learning only one language;
- A measure of total vocabulary provides the best indicator of young bilingual children's language learning capacity;
- Bilingual children can have different strengths in each language;
- The quantity and quality of [bilingual children](#)'s input in each language influence their rates of development in each language;
- Immigrant parents should not be discouraged from speaking their native language to their children;
- Bilingual environments are heterogeneous in the support they provide for each language; there is no average bilingual experience or [bilingual](#) skill profile.

Provided by Florida Atlantic University

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