

Migrant children are often their parents' translators – and it can lead to ill health

May 26 2016, by Renu Narchal



Credit: cottonbro studio from Pexels

An estimated [30% of Australians](#) are born overseas while nearly 20% [speak a language other than English](#) at home. But our translation services grapple to meet the demand of those who don't have an adequate grasp

of English, particularly recent migrants and refugees.

Research shows in these situations, [children](#) often end up interpreting – known as language brokering – for their parents. This is a heavy responsibility with psychological consequences.

Migration challenges

Migrating to a new country has many [challenges](#), including losing the closeness of extended family, needing to learn a new language and having to fit into a foreign society. These changes are often easier for children than adults.

Children attend educational institutions with locals, where they are subjected to the dominant language and culture. This helps [them quickly learn the language](#) and cultural nuances of their host country.

Parents often end up depending on their children to [translate and interpret both the new culture and language in a range of settings](#), including the doctor's office, legal situations (where children can help their parents fill out immigration documents), and mediating during parent-teacher interviews.

Research shows children as [young as eight](#), who obviously don't have training in translation and become linguistic and cultural mediators, [experience increased responsibility](#) which leads to role reversal. Parents express dependent behaviours and children, in an attempt to meet their parent's needs, [acquire nurturing, supportive, and care-giving behaviours](#).

Such [relationship disturbances](#) have been linked to aggression, risk-taking behaviours and social problems in children.

Language brokers

There are some [benefits to children taking on increased responsibilities](#). Children who translate for parents [acquire enhanced cognitive](#), social, emotional and interpersonal skills.

A survey [based on 280 sixth grade](#) (aged around 11 to 12) Latino family translators at a Chicago school found they performed significantly better on standardised tests of reading and math than their non-translating peers.

In another study, [researchers interviewed 25 Latino children](#) of around 12 years who were translating for their parents. These children said their responsibilities made them feel proud, helpful and useful.

Research also shows Latino children of around the same age, who didn't feel translation to be a burden, [had no negative health outcomes](#).

But translating and interpreting is a complex process. Where children saw their increased responsibility as a burden, it worked as a stressor, [leading to risk-taking behaviours](#), such as drinking alcohol and using marijuana.

Overstretched with responsibility beyond their age, [children can feel obligated](#), with those who become translators reporting [high levels of stress](#) and pressure to translate mature matters accurately.

Children also [often feel overburdened](#) in complicated and serious situations, such as when they are required to translate documentation.

One study obtained [longitudinal data](#) from 182 first- and second-generation Chinese 15-year-olds. It found the children who more frequently acted as interpreters for their parents had poorer

psychological health. Frequency of translation was also associated with parent-child conflict, particularly for those who held strong family values.

Legal mechanisms

In California, [a bill written in 2013 by a former Chinese immigrant](#) who translated for his parents as a child, proposed banning the use of child interpreters younger than 15 by any state or local agency or program that receives state funding.

Now a child psychologist, the former child translator told the Los Angeles Times that not only were children likely to make mistakes in translation, the "youngsters cannot handle the stress". Although the bill [wasn't successful](#), the process highlighted the need for better understanding and awareness of the issue.

Australia could consider a similar approach, but more research would need to be done to spell out the negative implications of language brokering.

If such a legal mechanism were implemented, we'd need enough translation services in medical, legal and other official settings to fill the gap child translators would leave behind.

An unpublished study I completed showed a number of children who acted as interpreters found their education was disrupted, while others considered leaving school due to their responsibilities.

Currently, there are no supports and services provided for children translators in Australia. Nor is there enough research on the prevalence of this experience in the country. There is an urgent need for the government, the community, and [parents](#) to better understand the

potential impacts of language brokering on children's health.

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