 S P E E C H I N C

Bilingualism

By Katie Pengilly MA,CCC,SLP

More than half the world’s population is bilingual, and the number of bilingual speakers in the US is growing. So too is the body of research looking at the effects of bilingualism, which shows many cognitive advantages compared to monolingualism: increased vocabulary, listening and reading skills, advanced problem solving, flexible thinking, and multi-tasking.

In some cases, the bilingualism is forced, such as when a family moves to a country with a different language. In other instances, the bilingualism is optional, such as when a family decides to enroll their child in an emersion preschool or kindergarten. Simultaneous bilinguals learn 2 languages from birth, while sequential bilinguals learn a first language, and later introduce a second. Regardless of the specific circumstance, children have an enormous capacity for developing more than one language.

With regard to supporting bilingual learners, the goal is simple: provide a high quantity of high quality exposure to each language. The exact manner in which to accomplish this seems to be causing some confusion and conflicting advice to parents. For example, some parents are advised to take a structured approach based on person, with one parent speaking one language and the other parent speaking the other. (In this situation, preference should be given to the language proficiency of each family member.) Some parents are advised to take a structured approach based on place, with one language spoken in the home and the other at school. And other families find a flexible use of both languages, without fixed rules, leads to balanced exposure and positive results.

Some of the developmental guidelines for bilingual children also seem to be causing some confusion. Most bilingual children speak their first words by the time they are 1 year, as is the case for monolingual children. Most bilingual children combine words into short phrases by the time they are 2 years old, as is the case with monolingual children. These early vocabulary words can be in one or both languages. As language develops, bilingual children may mix grammar rules, and/or use words from both languages within the same sentence. This is an entirely normal part of becoming a bilingual speaker. Some bilingual children, particularly sequential bilinguals, may not talk very much when they begin using their second language. This silent period may last several weeks or months, and is also a normal part of becoming a bilingual speaker.

I have regular conversations with parents regarding children who are exposed to multiple languages, and are thinking that their children are “confused” or “delayed” due to multiple language exposure, or bilingualism. Bilingual children are not more likely than monolingual children to have difficulties with language, show delays in learning, or be diagnosed with a language disorder. But parent perceptions are often otherwise, revealing a disconnect from scientific findings. Therefore, if a bilingual child is exhibiting symptoms of a speech, language and/or reading delay or difficulty, it will be evident in both languages, and should be evaluated by a professional. And if the child is not, continue to provide a high quantity of high quality exposure to each language.

*Katie Pengilly is a Speech and Language Pathologist, and the owner of SPEECH Inc., a pediatric private practice specializing in speech, language reading and writing. She can be reached at kathryn.pengilly@speechinc.com. More information can be found at www.speechinc.com.*