

# Bilingualism FAQs for Professionals

## What is bilingualism?

Bilingualism is the ability to understand and use two languages. Multilingualism refers to the use of more than two languages. Research consistently shows that learning more than one language does not cause or contribute to communication difficulties (Paradis, 2021).

## Can being bilingual be beneficial?

There are many benefits to being bilingual, such as:

- Enhanced problem-solving and executive function skills (Bialystok, 2022).
- Greater creativity and mental flexibility and memory.
- Long-term advantages in literacy and academic performance in both languages (De Cat, 2020).
- Supports intergenerational relationships within families and fostering of cultural identity.

## Do bilingual children learn to speak later than monolingual children?

No. Research confirms that bilingual children follow the same developmental timeline as monolingual children. While vocabulary may be shared across two languages, total language knowledge is similar to monolingual children (Hoff, 2018). Some children, whether bilingual or monolingual, develop speech at different rates, which is a natural variation in [language development](#).

## Should parents/carers speak to their child in English because it is the school language?

No. It is best to use the language they are most comfortable with. Maintaining a strong first language foundation supports second language development and overall cognitive development. Sudden shifts to only using English can disrupt language skills and emotional development (Cummins, 2019).

## Why might some children prefer to speak English?

Children use the language that is most relevant in their daily interactions. If English is dominant at school and among peers, they may prefer it. However, continuing to speak the home language ensures bilingual development and preserves cultural identity. Adults can help by emphasising the importance of home language. It's important that parents/carers keep speaking their first language, even though the child answers in English. Children will understand what has been said and continue learning the language.

### **Does speaking two or more languages cause communication difficulties?**

No. Learning multiple languages does not cause speech or language difficulties. If a child has a speech /language difficulty it will be present in all their languages, not just one. Continuing to use the home language benefits overall development (Thordardottir, 2020).

### **Is mixing languages (code-switching) a problem?**

No. Code-switching (mixing languages in a conversation) is a normal and highly skilled linguistic process. It reflects the brain's ability to use multiple languages efficiently and is common in bilingual speakers (Grosjean, 2021).

### **How can parents/carers support their child's bilingual development?**

- Speak the home language confidently and consistently in a range of different situations e.g. in play, during shopping, when watching TV etc.
- Encourage meaningful interactions in both languages through storytelling, books, and songs.
- Provide opportunities for bilingual social interactions (e.g., community groups, language classes).
- Avoid correcting language use—support all language attempts.
- Share a list of common home language words with teachers to create a supportive environment.

### **When should I refer to Speech and Language Therapy?**

A referral should be considered if there are concerns about the child's communication in their first language. Language difficulties should be evident across both languages rather than just in English. Consultation with parents or bilingual staff can provide important information.

### **Useful Resources:**

- Speech and Language UK: <https://speechandlanguage.org.uk/educators-and-professionals/resource-library-for-educators/children-learning-more-than-one-language>
- Bilingualism Matters: [www.bilingualism-matters.ppls.ed.ac.uk/parents-questions](http://www.bilingualism-matters.ppls.ed.ac.uk/parents-questions)