



“Kids Just Pick Up Languages” and Other Multilingual Myths

by Kathy Green

With such a diverse international community, it is not surprising that multilingualism is found throughout Shanghai. Even though it brings opportunity, speaking more than one language at home can also cause concern. Some households easily use three to five languages, while other parents worry if their young children will have language acquisition problems due to their multilingual environment. Other monolingual families arrive with high hopes that their kids will easily pick up Mandarin, only to be disappointed when their child is in Level 1 Chinese class for the third year.

For families wrestling with multilingualism, it helps to first understand some common multilingual myths. With the research-based truth in mind, one can better understand what constitutes cause for concern in terms of potential developmental delay. Finally, it is helpful to consider a few pointers from families who have successfully integrated multilingualism into daily life.

Multilingual Myths

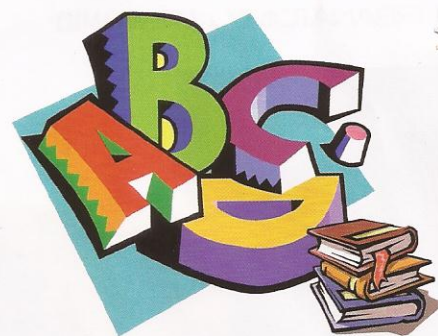
The Center for Applied Linguists (CAL), found at www.cal.org, publishes academic research from organizations such as University of California and the University of Antwerp, both of which debunk some common multilingual myths.

Myth: Hearing two or more languages in early childhood is the cause of a language disorder or delay.

Fact: Multilingualism is the norm in most parts of the world. Some research suggests that learning more than one language can even improve brain functioning.

Myth: If a child uses two languages within one sentence, it is a sign of confusion.

Fact: Research shows that children use more than one language in a sentence if the person they are speaking to understands both languages. Like adults, they are able to determine the context of the situation and use language that is appropriate to the listener.



Myth: Children are able to just "pick up" a language.

Fact: Any adult language learner appreciates that while one can quickly learn to express simple concepts, it takes a lot of experience in different contexts to develop a robust use of language. Children learning languages also need time, regular exposure, and the chance to use the language in many different contexts. If kids do not have a need, they are rarely motivated to use a language.

Myth: The younger the person, the easier it is to learn a language.

Fact: Early childhood language

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exposure has the advantage of imprinting proper pronunciation that older language learners often can never replicate. Children exposed from birth to two languages also are more likely to have both as “first languages.” That said, it is surprising that both adults and children aged 12-13 have been shown to perform as well or better than early primary kids in learning an additional language. This may be attributed to experienced students having more developed learning strategies.

With a clearer understanding of how children acquire language fluency, it is possible to recognize what constitutes reason for concern about language development, particularly for small children.

When to Be Concerned

At a recent Bumps and Babes event, Speech Language Pathologist Elaine Robin offered the following information on what is “normal” development for multilingual kids.

First, when it comes to evaluating a multilingual infant/toddler, speech-language professionals make a

distinction between the following three *Ds*.

- **Differences:** The child is developing normally in one language, but more slowly in the other(s). In this case, there is likely no underlying problem. The reason for speaking one language can simply be because the child prefers it. If parents are concerned, asking a professional for an evaluation can give peace of mind.

- **Delays:** All languages are developing in an acceptable sequential manner, but at a slower pace than the average. While it can seem that there is a delay, a multilingual kid’s combined vocabulary across all languages will often be the same or larger than a monolingual child. There can be, however, underlying reasons for delay that warrant a discussion with a pediatrician or speech therapist.

- **Disorder:** All languages have deficits in the comprehension and/or production (content, form, use). Children who are having problems in all languages should be evaluated by a professional.

Second, regardless of the number of languages a child is learning, the sequence and timing of major

milestones will be similar to monolingual children. Olivia’s Place – a pediatric speech, occupational, and physical therapy clinic – offers these quick guidelines to determine if an infant/toddler’s development is tracking on average.

Using any language or combination of languages:

- By one year of age a child should have single words like “ball, up, mama.”
- By two years of age a child should begin to combine 2 words like “go bye-bye, doggy bark.”
- By three years of age a child should be speaking in complete sentences and the speech should be relatively clear; however grammar skills are not completely accurate.

Additionally, for children of all ages, it is important to note how they interact in a variety of situations. “Selective mutism” is an anxiety disorder characterized by a child who will talk freely at home, but will then be silent at school or in other public places. According the Selective Mutism Group, most children are diagnosed between the ages of 3 and 8 when they

are in school situations. It is notable that children who are immersed in foreign language at school can go undiagnosed since parents and educators might consider the child to be shy. If a child is not using *any* language in public situations, it warrants some investigation since this disorder is very treatable with proper counseling.

If you are concerned about your child, take advantage of the professional resources that are available since early therapies can have profoundly positive impacts. If your child attends school, talk with her teacher. Discuss your concerns with your child's pediatrician. If you need a specialist, both Olivia's Place (www.oliviasplace.org) and Essential Learning Group (www.essentiallearninggroup.com) offer speech/language screenings and evaluations. Remember, it is never too early for an evaluation.

Getting Ready for a Multilingual World

If multilingualism is important to your

family, try integrating the following into your daily routine.

Offer frequent exposure to all desired languages in a variety of situations. If you know more than one language, some experts suggest communicating consistently in one language with your children. Other linguists say that simply speaking as you normally would is not confusing for children. Whatever method is comfortable for you, do not be afraid of using different languages with other people if your child is present. This is the reality of being multilingual, and children learn context switching simply by observing, with no explanation required.

Keep language learning a positive experience for the whole family. Alejandra Guzman, a Mexican native and mother of two children ages 6 and 9, gives insight into how her kids have successfully assimilated Spanish, English and Mandarin, "Overall, keeping our original language at home has been the key to have Spanish speaking kids in mostly English speaking environments. We do not put any pressure on them to learn the

language in a more formal way. Playing with other kids has been the best way to learn all of their languages."

Fluency takes years of commitment from the whole family. Kids can learn languages without the baggage that comes with adulthood, but parents should remember that fluency normally take years. Dutch native, Karin Haverkorn, says of her experience of being immersed in an English school at age 11, "It was very overwhelming, but I persisted and now I'm glad for the experience."

In summary, language learning is a wonderful opportunity to give children. If, for some, reason your best efforts fall short of multilingual fluency, keep in mind that learning language is only one dimension of parenting. Inspiring a life-long love of learning is more important since kids can choose to learn a language later, even if they will have an accent. As Anthea Gupta, a Senior Lecturer at the University of Leeds, told the online community linguistlist.org, "Don't try to control the environment too much, and if things go wrong, be accepting. Other things matter much more." ●



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