

Can children with autism spectrum disorder be bilingual?

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Educators who work with children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) are often confronted with the question: can children with ASD be bilingual? ASD is a neurodevelopmental condition, characterized by difficulties in social communication and restricted and repetitive behavior (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). ASD is estimated to affect 1 in every 66 children, suggesting that in an average urban school there will be at least one child in each grade with ASD (Public Health Agency of Canada, 2018). To assist educators in answering the above question, we provide a synthesis of research on this topic, focusing on children from immigrant backgrounds who are learning English as a second language. As we detail below, evidence suggests that bilingualism is attainable, and possibly even advantageous, for children with ASD.

Research about bilingual development in children with ASD has only begun to emerge in the last few years and focuses on children in the preschool and early elementary years. Consistently, these studies find that bilingualism does not add any additional language learning burden for children with ASD (e.g., Drysdale, van der Meer, & Kagohara, 2015; Hambly & Fombonne, 2012; Kay-Raining Bird, Lamond, & Holden, 2012; Lim, O'Reilly, Sigafos, & Lancioni, 2018; Lund, Kohlmeier, & Durán, 2017; Seung, Siddiqi, & Elder, 2006; Valicenti-McDermott et al., 2013; Zhou et al., 2019). This point is highlighted by researchers in New Zealand who conducted a systematic review and concluded that “bilingualism does not have a negative impact on language development for children with ASD” (Drysdale, van der Meer, & Kagohara, 2015, p. 26). To illustrate this point, we summarize work from researchers at the University of British Columbia. Petersen, Marinova-Todd, and Mirenda (2012) compared the language skills of preschool-aged children with ASD who were learning English as a second language and speaking Chinese at home with monolingual English-speaking children with ASD. They found that compared to the monolingual children, the Mandarin-English bilingual children had equivalent scores on several measures of language and vocabulary. In interpreting these findings, it is important to note that learning a second language does not “cure” the communication challenges experienced by children with ASD. The crucial point here is that learning a second language does not make communication challenges any worse.

The finding that children with ASD have comparable English abilities regardless of whether they are being raised in bilingual or monolingual households raises the question as to why it would matter what advice parents are given about bilingualism. As it turns out, it may matter greatly. For families from migrant backgrounds, the home language is often used for communication among family members, and proficiency in this language maintains a connection to one's extended family and culture. If the family is not fluent in English, asking them to communicate with their child exclusively in English may limit the quality of their interactions and colour these interactions with anxiety or worry over language use (Baker, 2013). When a child with ASD is not taught the home language, there is an added risk that they will be excluded from these familial connections. As such, continued bilingualism may be essential for the child's sense of self, sense of belonging and their relationships with family.

What do children with ASD need to support language development in both languages?

To date, much of the research has focused on whether children with ASD can be bilingual. As noted above, the emerging evidence presents a resounding “yes!”. This research represents a necessary first step in advancing our understanding of bilingualism in ASD. Much research is now needed to determine best practices for supporting language development in both English and the home language for children from immigrant backgrounds who also have ASD.

It is clear that when children with ASD are not provided with opportunities to learn the home language, they, of course, will not. That is, children with ASD can become bilingual only if they are given the opportunity to do so (Gonzalez-Barrero & Nadig, 2018; Paradis, Govindarajan, & Hernandez, 2018). There are many compounding factors that could result in children with ASD having reduced opportunities to learn and even maintain their home language. For example, families may choose to stop home language use with their child over fears that two languages may be too much (Hampton, Rabagliati, Sorace, & Fletcher-Watson, 2017; Yu, 2009). Further, many interventions are provided in English and this English-centric focus could result in even less home language use between families and their child with ASD (Drysdale et al., 2015). This leaves us with an obvious conundrum: if people do not speak a language with children, there is no way for the child to learn that language. As such, it is imperative that we move the conversation beyond “can children with ASD be bilingual?” to “how do we support these children in bilingualism?”

What is the teacher’s role?

As educators, likely English-speaking, it may not be possible for you to communicate with children in their home languages. There is no expectation that you do so. In fact, you play a crucial role in providing the rich English language environment that is helping these children, and all children in your classroom, develop and enhance their English skills. Still, there are a few small things you can do to support families who have children with ASD in continuing to support the home language (adapted from Paradis, Kirova & Dachyshyn, 2009):

- Most importantly, demonstrate to the family that you value their language and culture and that you support continued home language development. Ask questions. Be positive.
- Bring a little of the home language into the classroom, even if it is by learning a greeting in the language. This may help the child feel that their language has value and purpose outside of the home. Small gestures can go a long way.
- If the child with ASD is capable and willing, have them teach their classmates a few phrases. This is another way to illustrate that their home language has a place at school and that it is valued. It also offers them an opportunity to be an expert and teach their peers.
- Are there other children in the classroom who also speak other languages at home? Would they be willing to share their languages? Even if it is not the language spoken by the child with ASD, showing that you value bilingualism sends the message that you are in support of home language maintenance.

Resources:

For an infographic about bilingualism and ASD:

https://cdn.dal.ca/content/dam/dalhousie/images/faculty/medicine/departments/department-sites/pediatrics/research/autism/Infographic_bilingualASD_simple_FINAL_final_Eng.pdf

For some more tips on working with children who speak other languages at home (not ASD specific):

<https://education.alberta.ca/media/1224523/working-with-young-children-who-are-learning-english-as-a-new-language.pdf>

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