

BILINGUALISM IN CHILDHOOD: New evidence of the impact of growing up speaking more than one language

Acquiring two languages does not affect the cognitive and non-cognitive skills of young children but it does temporarily affect their linguistic performance. While bilingual children can initially lag behind in naming vocabulary, for most of them the disadvantage disappears before the age of five.

These are among the findings of research by **Joanna Clifton-Sprigg**, to be presented at the annual congress of the European Economic Association in Mannheim in August 2015. Her results should dispel concerns about the academic performance of bilingual children.

Her study compares three groups of under-six-year-olds in Scotland: one group with two UK-born parents; one with two foreign-born parents; and one with one of each. Almost half the children with at least one foreign-born parent speak English and another language at home, compared with only 1% of children in the first group. Typically, linguists believe that bilingualism makes children better at creative thinking even if it briefly holds them back while they have to learn two languages at the same time.

By separating out children with two foreign-born parents from those with mixed nationalities, the study is able to bypass the effect of the parents themselves – two foreign-born parents may be worse at teaching English in the first place.

Surprisingly, the research finds that bilingualism has no real effect other than temporarily to slow a child's language learning skills, which mostly evens out by the time they are five. In fact, the only real difference between the groups is that children with two foreign-born parents score 25% lower than the others in vocabulary tests, which continues even up to the age of five.

The author points out that one way of reducing this gap could be to provide formal childcare, exposing children of two foreign-born parents to English at an earlier age.

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Acquiring two languages does not affect the cognitive and non-cognitive skills of young children but it does temporarily affect their linguistic performance. While bilingual children can initially lag behind in naming vocabulary, for most of them the disadvantage disappears before the age of five. These findings should dispel concerns about the academic performance of bilingual children.

The study compares the cognitive and non-cognitive skills of three groups of under-six-year-olds living in Scotland: those with two UK-born parents; those with one UK and one foreign-born parent; and those with two foreign-born parents. Almost 50% of children in the latter two groups speak English and another language at home, compared with 1% of peers with UK-born parents. This is increasingly important due to the growing number of multilingual and multicultural families in Europe.

Previous research has established that children's early educational attainment is essential for their later schooling and adult life outcomes.

Language is a particularly potent instrument because it influences children's performance as well as their further skill acquisition.

Linguists agree that bilingualism may give children an educational advantage over peers by changing their understanding of certain concepts and improving their creative thinking abilities. At the same time, it may delay speech as it requires simultaneous acquisition of vocabulary in two languages. This research provides evidence to suggest that bilingualism benefits children.

The linguistic competence is shaped by home environment and, therefore, depends significantly on the parents.

Parental ability to teach a child two languages plays a crucial role in bilingualism and is often overlooked. In particular, two foreign-born parents may be in a worse position to raise a bilingual child due to limited linguistic ability or lack of country-specific knowledge.

The novelty of this study lies in the separation of the role of parental background from the effect of language on skills. It considers an under-researched but growing group of children from mixed nationality families. The findings are surprising.

First, contrary to expectations, there is no evidence to support the claim that acquisition of two languages affects any skills other than the ability to name vocabulary.

As a group, bilingual children score lower than their monolingual peers in the Vocabulary Exercise at the age of three but almost catch up by the age of five.

Differences emerge, however, when family composition is taken into account. Specifically, at the age of three, bilingual children with two foreign-born parents obtain a 25% lower score in the task than monolingual children. The significant performance gap persists at the age of five.

Follow-up research is seeking explanation for this heterogeneity. Identification of the source of the divergence, such as parental origins or the country-specific context, is key for informing policies aimed at supporting early childhood performance.

The role of parental background remains to be analysed. But the study does provide information on other factors that might be expected to play a role. For example, provision of formal childcare helps to address the performance gap by exposing children whose parents are not native English speakers to the language.

Given the positive results, particularly for children from mixed-nationality backgrounds, it remains to be established whether bilingual children outperform their monolingual peers in skill tests at later age.

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Best of both worlds? Effect of bilingualism on young children's skills

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