

KY Chapter Immigrant Child Health Task Force

July, 2019

BILINGUALISM AND SPEECH DELAY

You are seeing a 3-year-old boy for a checkup. The child was born in USA to Spanish speaking parents. He uses about 5-6 words, does not use phrases yet, he points at things he wants. He makes good eye contact. Parents report that the child understands “everything”. Parents are not concerned about child’s social interaction. He has a normal hearing test obtained by audiologist. He passed a MCHAT performed in office. Parents were told by friends, relatives and daycare provider that the child “does not talk much” because they speak Spanish at home. Parents asked if they should be concerned.

What would you do next? Reassure parents? Refer to speech/language pathologist?

DISCUSSION:

In the United States 21% of school age children (between ages 5-17) speak a language other than English at home (1). Bilingual acquisition can take place in one of two ways:

1. **Simultaneous Acquisition** occurs when a child is raised bilingually from birth or when the second language is introduced before the age of three. Children learning two languages simultaneously go through the same developmental stages as children learning one language
2. **Sequential Acquisition** occurs when a second language is introduced after the first language is well established, generally after the age of three (2).

Stages in sequential acquisition of language (3,4) include:

- **Use of the home language** for a brief period.
- **“Silent” or “Nonverbal” Period** when child is first exposed to a second language.
- **Use short or imitative sentences.** The child may use one-word labels or memorized phrases he/she hears.
- **Begin to produce his/her own sentences.**

COMMON MYTHS:

1. **MYTH: Bilingualism causes speech delay:** Bilingual children may say their first words slightly later than monolingual children, but still within the normal age range (between 8-15 months). A bilingual toddler might mix parts of a word from one language with parts from another language. The total number of words should be comparable to the number used by a child the same age speaking one language (4,5). If a bilingual child has a speech or language problem, it will show up in both languages. However, these problems are not caused by learning two languages. Bilingualism should never be used as an explanation for speech or language disorder (5).

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2. **MYTH: Learning two languages will cause confusion:** Some bilingual children may mix grammar rules, or they might use words from both languages in the same sentence (i.e., "quiero mas juice" [I want more juice]). This is a normal part of bilingual language development and does not mean that the child is confused. Usually by age 4, children can separate the different languages but might still blend or mix both languages in the same sentence on occasion. They will ultimately learn to separate both languages correctly.

Back to the child in the vignette, a 3-year-old child who is not using phrases and is using only a limited number of words would guarantee further evaluation. In this case, Autism Spectrum Disorder or a hearing disorder do not seem likely, but definitely this child would benefit from further evaluation by a qualified speech/language therapist. Reassuring parents would only delay needed services. School based services and/or private speech/language therapy evaluation and services would be appropriate. Because he is 3 year of age, he would not qualify for First Steps services.

REFERENCES:

1. U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. Available online: <http://nces.ed.gov/fastfacts/display.asp?id=96>
2. Meisel, J. (2004). The Bilingual Child. In T. Bhatia & W. Ritchie (Eds.), *The Handbook of Bilingualism*. pp 91-113. Blackwell Publishing Ltd.
3. Paradis, J., Genesee, F., & Crago, M. (2011). *Dual Language Development and Disorders: A handbook on bilingualism & second language learning*. Baltimore, MD: Paul H. Brookes Publishing.
4. Meisel, J. (2004). The Bilingual Child. In T. Bhatia & W. Ritchie (Eds.), *The Handbook of Bilingualism*. pp 91-113. Blackwell Publishing Ltd.
5. <https://www.healthychildren.org/English/ages-stages/gradeschool/school/Pages/7-Myths-Facts-Bilingual-Children-Learning-Language.aspx>
6. Kohnert, K. (2010). Bilingual Children with Primary Language impairment: Issues, evidence and implications for clinical actions. *Journal of Communication Disorders* 43 (2010) 456-473

OTHER RESOURCES:

<http://www.hanen.org/Helpful-Info/Articles/Bilingualism-in-Young-Children--Separating-Fact-fr.aspx>

<https://www.nationwidechildrens.org/family-resources-education/700childrens/2017/12/teaching-kids-a-second-language-can-it-cause-a-speech-delay>

<https://www.asha.org/public/speech/development/chart/>

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