

## Supporting multilingual children's communication development

Australia has always been a multilingual country. According to the latest census, 24.8 per cent of Australian households speak a language other than English.

Multilingualism is not rare or uncommon. In fact, the majority of the world's children are multilingual.

Being multilingual has advantages and benefits for both individual children and society as a whole.

However, many Australian children are at risk of losing their home language because of the heavy influence of English monolingualism.

Children may need extra support to maintain their home language.

### About multilingualism

Multilingualism is the ability to speak, sign or understand more than one language.

A multilingual child may not be proficient in all of their languages, but they are exposed to multiple languages in their environment.

A child's proficiency in their languages will depend on:

- the age that they learn each language
- who they use the language with
- how often they hear the language
- where they use the language
- their motivation to use the language

The terms multilingualism and bilingualism are often used interchangeably.

### Benefits of multilingualism

#### Cognitive (thinking) benefits

Multilingualism is associated with better performance in:

- abstract and symbolic representation
- attention
- problem solving
- phonological awareness
- vocabulary
- executive functioning
- metacognitive capabilities.

#### Social benefits

Children who are exposed to multiple languages in early childhood have better:

- social skills
- empathy (understanding how other people are feeling)
- theory of mind (understanding what other people are thinking)
- perspective taking.

#### Emotional benefits

Using the home language supports children's emotional development by improving:

- connection to cultural identity
- a sense of belonging
- a strong sense of identity
- self-esteem
- access relationships with people who speak the home language (such as parents and grandparents)
- access to cultural practices that only take place in the home language.

#### Educational advantages

Bilingual students appear to do better than their monolingual peers in:

- letter and word identification
- problem solving
- reading comprehension and vocabulary
- mathematical ability
- grammar
- spelling
- writing.

Multilingual students with strong proficiency in their languages are less likely to drop out of high school.

Multilingual students are more likely to attend university than monolingual students.

#### Employment and economic advantages

Australians who are competent speakers of English as well as another language are more likely to:

- be in full time employment.
- have postgraduate qualifications.
- earn a higher salary than monolinguals.

### How we can support multilingualism

#### Foster positive attitudes to multilingualism

Children quickly learn from people's opinions.

So model positive attitudes towards diverse languages in the home, in school and in the community.

Talk to children about the gift of being multilingual and why it something to be treasured.

### Create lots of opportunities for exposure

Living in an English-dominant society, children will pick up English from school, social groups, and media.

However, without consistent effort children may have far less exposure to their home language.

Families can have rules for using the home language as much as possible to increase exposure and proficiency.

### Create a home language community

Children are most likely to maintain language with peers.

Having playgroups or social activities where the home language is used can help children to speak and maintain their language.

### Make languages visible

Take children to places where their language is used and valued.

Make sure classrooms and homes include children's languages on posters, art, food and in interactions.

### Make it fun!

Children won't want to do something that is boring.

Make language learning fun by using games, songs, cooking and fun activities to engage children in language learning.

### Role of the speech pathologist

Multilingualism is not a language disorder or impairment. In fact, it can often be an advantage for children.

Multilingual children usually do not need to see a speech pathologist.

However, sometimes it can be difficult to tell if a multilingual child is developing typically.

This is because each multilingual child's development is unique. Development depends on the languages they are learning, how often they hear the languages, and the context in which the languages are used.

If a child has a language disorder, it will appear across all their languages.

A speech pathologist can help in this case. (See fact sheet on 'Multilingualism and communication disorders' for more information).

Multilingualism is a gift that should be nurtured and supported, not just by parents, but by society as a whole.

Supporting diversity strengthens our society and supports multilingual children's belonging, wellbeing and long-term outcomes.

### Find out more

Here are some useful resources for supporting multilingualism:

VietSpeech book – while this book focuses on Vietnamese, the information is relevant to all families trying to maintain their home language:

<https://www.csu.edu.au/research/vietspeech/info>

Helping your child learn two languages video from Sydney Children's Hospital:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PIrD7PkeDdg>

The Talking Children Podcast – Multilingualism in

Children: <https://spotifyanchor-web.app.link/e/2ZVg8yanVvb>