

Autistic Children are Capable of Being **BILINGUAL**

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Parents of autistic children often wonder whether exposing their children to a second language would be helpful or not. The question is even more pressing for parents who are recent immigrants and who speak a language at home that is different from the dominant language in their new country of residence. In the case of North America, the dominant language is often English. Some child development specialists advise such parents to speak only one language to their autistic child. Their advice is based on a belief that autistic children are not capable of learning a new language since they are known to have difficulty with spoken language. They further assume that learning a new language would make their challenges even greater. I have studied this topic extensively, and can assert that this is *not* the case. Autistic individuals — both children and adults — are capable of being bilingual. Exposure to an additional language will do no harm to autistic or neurotypical children.

Autistic Children Can Function in More Than One Language

Just over a decade ago, there was no research evidence on the abilities of autistic children to learn new languages. People readily assumed that children who struggle with one language would do so even more with two.

Fortunately, the research evidence gathered over the past ten years convincingly shows that autistic children have the capacity to become bilingual. These studies usually compared bilingual children with autism to monolingual children who were autistic. They examined various aspects of the children's language development. The results have consistently shown that bilingual children develop the same language abilities as monolingual children with autism. Both groups of children reach the same language milestones at the same age, and know the same average number of words both in terms of comprehension and in ability to say the words.^{1,2} In addition, they have similar knowledge of early grammar, or how to make well-formed simple sentences, and are similar in their ability to connect and communicate with people effectively.^{1,3}

They also have similar executive function abilities, or the skills which are needed to complete any goal-oriented activity.^{4,5} These skills include **planning**, such as the ability to make a to-do list of homework assignments, and **mental flexibility**, which involves being able to switch attention between listening to the teacher and writing notes. Other executive function skills are **inhibitory control**, which allows us to ignore the noise coming from the schoolyard in order to focus on what the teacher says, and **memory**, which helps us to remember what we wrote down already so that we do not write it again.

Bilingual autistic children are just as proficient at all of these common activities in school as monolingual children. As a result, we now know that exposing autistic individuals to more than one language is not harmful. They can function just as well in two languages as in one.

Avoid Imposing Monolingualism on Autistic Children

It is perplexing that immigrant families, especially those that speak a language other than English at home, are still advised to speak only one language to their children.⁶ This can lead the family to switch to speaking English at home. However, this is often the weaker language for the parents as they are learning it themselves. Interviews with these parents reveal some of the challenges that they face.^{7,8}

While most parents value early intervention for their children, they also note that few, if any, of the services are available in their native language. Many parents reported that they were not comfortable speaking English and found it challenging to do so with their children. They also expressed feelings of sadness and personal loss from not being able to talk to their children in their native language.⁹ Parents who lacked English proficiency felt distanced from their autistic children.¹⁰ As a result, they spoke less to their children and engaged their children less in conversations in general. The parents were unable to model language that was grammatically correct and pragmatically relevant.³ Their children were thus deprived of exposure to rich and varied language, a requirement for the development of better speaking skills in children with autism.

These informative and sometimes poignant reports make it very clear that imposed monolingualism can cause more harm than good, especially in the context of families that are already bilingual.

A Cautionary Note

Immigrant parents who are native speakers of a language other than English should feel confident that it will not cause any harm to speak their native language to their autistic children. On the other hand, parents who choose to expose their children to a new language because they have heard that bilingualism might be of benefit should be more cautious. The research in this area is still new, and the evidence so far is very limited.

Early findings suggest that bilingual children with autism tend to perform better than their monolingual peers on some executive functions.^{5,11,12,13} However, no advantages have been found in working memory tasks, such as repeating a series of numbers.^{11,14}

To date, most of the information comes from single studies that are typically done with a small number of children. While the findings are promising, more of these types of studies are needed in order to be more confident that the bilingual advantages are indeed present in autistic children, too. In the meantime, parents might want to read to their autistic children and support their learning to read and write in English instead of challenging them with a new language. Parents could help their children improve their general speaking abilities in English, and nurture an appreciation of language in general. Eventually, their autistic children might choose to learn new languages themselves and experience success in the process. Nothing could be more rewarding for parents and children alike.



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