

## EARLY EXPOSURE TO MULTIPLE LANGUAGES VERSUS FOCUSING ON ONE: WHICH BENEFITS CHILDREN MORE?

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**Annotation:** This article highlights the debate between exposing children to multiple languages from a young age versus focusing on teaching them their mother tongue to perfection first. The article explores the benefits and potential drawbacks of both approaches and provides tips for parents who want to raise bilingual or multilingual children.

**Keywords:** Bilingualism, multilingualism, early language exposure, cognitive development, social communication, cultural identity, language learning, language proficiency, language delay, language confusion, language acquisition, language classes.

In today's globalized world, learning multiple languages is becoming increasingly important. Many parents, therefore, face a tough decision: should they focus on teaching their children their mother tongue to perfection first or should they expose them to multiple languages from a young age? Let us discuss the advantages and disadvantages of these two approaches.

### **The benefits of early exposure to multiple languages**

The earlier in life a child is exposed to multiple languages, the greater the benefits to their cognitive development. Research shows that learning new languages from an early age not only enhances communication skills but also fosters better problem-solving abilities and increases the child's overall cognitive abilities (Bialystok, 2017). With the steadily increasing globalization of our world, it has become more important than ever for children to learn multiple languages and enable them to easily communicate with people from different backgrounds in the future, and allow them to learn other languages with more ease.

One significant cognitive benefit of learning multiple languages from a young age is **increased attention** and **cognitive flexibility** (Diamond & Lee, 2011). Children who grow up in bilingual homes readily switch between different languages and must constantly decide which language to use. This decision-making carries over to other areas of cognitive development, increasing their reasoning skills, and problem-solving abilities. In turn, this increased cognitive flexibility makes them more

adaptable and able to handle new information and situations in better ways in the future.

Another significant benefit of being bilingual or multilingual is the potential for increased empathy and **social communication abilities** (Lanza, Villamil, & Law, 2017). The development of communication skills involves the understanding and expression of emotions and thoughts, as well as the ability to build and maintain relationships with others. Being exposed to different languages and cultures at an early age helps children learn to connect with others from different backgrounds and appreciate different perspectives, which helps build their social skills. They also develop greater awareness, sensitivity, and empathy towards other cultures and languages, contributing towards the development of social and emotional intelligence.

Finally, learning multiple languages from a young age also makes it easier for children to learn new languages later in life. Research shows that when children learn different languages simultaneously, their brains develop the ability to recognize and categorize different constructs and words efficiently. Moreover, exposure to different grammar rules, sounds, and sentence structures in early childhood allows them to learn new languages quickly and efficiently later in life. Further, being exposed to multiple languages helps in the development of metalinguistic awareness, which is the ability to reflect on one's own and others' use of language and use of language-related services and technology. All these factors combined help in language acquisition later in life (Paradis & Nicoladis, 2010).

Providing children with the opportunity to learn multiple languages from their early childhood provides tremendous cognitive, social and emotional benefits. It enhances problem-solving and learning abilities, better communication and empathy, and makes it easier to learn additional languages in the future. Parents must prioritize multilingual development and provide such opportunities for integration of different languages and cultures in the child's daily life.

### **Potential drawbacks**

While research demonstrates the many benefits of bilingualism, it is essential to note that there can also be potential drawbacks. One potential issue is **language delay** or **confusion** in a child who is surrounded by multiple languages. Early exposure to multiple languages can lead to children being confused about which language to use or experiencing a delay in their language development, especially in cases where parents are not consistent in using specific languages with the child (Hoff, 2013).

Another potential drawback is the **possibility of accent or pronunciation problems** when speaking one or more languages. Studies show that bilingual children may experience difficulties with pronunciation in both languages, particularly when sounds are distinct in one language but are not in the second (Landry & Rixon, 2018). They may also mix grammar, syntax, or vocabulary from both languages in their speech, which can limit their ability to communicate effectively with monolingual speakers of either language (Genesee, Boivin, & Nicoladis, 2017). Lastly, in some cases, a child's cultural identity may become confused or lost when growing up in a multilingual environment. This can happen when a child lives in a society where the dominant language or culture is different from their home language or culture. This challenge can create difficulty for children in fitting in with either culture or language (De Houwer, 2017).

It is vital to note that these potential risks can be avoided by **being consistent in the use of language** at home, exposing children to a linguistic environment that is **stable** and not too confusing. It is also essential to ensure that children have opportunities to develop their sense of cultural identity and cohesion.

### **The benefits of focusing on one language first**

Teaching children their mother tongue from an early age is often advocated by parents and educators alike. Besides the cultural aspect, there are clear benefits to prioritizing a child's first language during their early years. Research shows that children who have a solid foundation in their mother tongue have a deeper understanding of language overall, which makes it easier for them to learn additional languages later in life (Gathercole, Thomas, & Kennedy, 2019).

One of the most significant benefits of teaching children their mother tongue initially is that it enables them to develop a **deep understanding of language** itself. By allowing them to develop this deep understanding, it allows children to grasp the foundational knowledge of grammar, syntax, and vocabulary that underpin all languages. Furthermore, children who have a strong foundation in their mother tongue are better equipped to understand the similarities and differences between languages, making learning other languages easier (Bialystok, Craik, & Luk, 2012). In addition to the cognitive benefits, focusing on a child's mother tongue also helps them develop a **stronger sense of cultural identity**, thus giving them a better sense of belonging and self-confidence. Children who grow up learning their mother tongue are often more connected to their cultural heritage and more confident in their communication skills. This confidence, in turn, allows them to feel more comfortable engaging with other cultures and languages (Barac & Bialystok, 2012).

Moreover, research shows that children who have a strong foundation in their mother tongue are often **more creative** and **better able to express themselves**. Children who learn their mother tongue before learning another language are more likely to develop a **rich vocabulary** and to be able to **express complex thoughts and emotions**. This ability to express themselves well in their mother tongue puts them in a good position when it comes to learning other languages as well (Genesee & Nicoladis, 2008).

Another benefit of teaching children their mother tongue initially is that this provides a **solid foundation** for learning other languages. Research suggests that those who are bilingual from an early age are better equipped to detect grammar differences and similarities in new languages (Barac & Bialystok, 2012). Multilingualism is highly valued in today's globalized world, and children who have a background in their mother tongue are often better equipped to learn additional languages quickly and easily.

In conclusion, focusing on teaching children their mother tongue initially offers significant benefits. Not only does it provide an important foundation in language itself, but it also bolsters a child's sense of cultural identity and provides them with the tools to excel in their communication and language skills.

### **Potential drawbacks**

While teaching children their mother tongue initially has many benefits, there are also some potential drawbacks to consider. For instance, teaching a child only their mother tongue limits their exposure to other languages and cultures, which might become a problem later in life when they have to communicate with people from different linguistic backgrounds. Let us discuss several potential drawbacks:

1. **Limited exposure to other languages:** If a child is only taught their mother tongue initially, they may not be exposed to other languages and cultures until much later. This can lead to a lack of exposure and understanding of other cultures and can limit their ability to communicate with people from different linguistic backgrounds.
2. **Delayed second language acquisition:** Focusing too much on teaching the mother tongue initially can delay the acquisition of a second language. Children who are not exposed to a second language until later in life may struggle to learn it as easily as those who were exposed to it from an early age (Genesee, Lindholm-Leary, Saunders, & Christian, 2005).

3. **Insufficient proficiency** in the mother tongue: While it's important to focus on teaching a child's mother tongue initially, it's also important to ensure that they have sufficient proficiency in it. If a child's mother tongue is not taught properly, they may struggle to develop the necessary language skills needed for successful communication and academic achievement (Kopke & Kormos, 2018).

4. **Difficulty in adapting to new environments:** If children are not exposed to other languages and cultures at an early age, they may struggle to adapt to new environments that are different from their own cultural background (Bialystok, 2009). This can cause difficulties in socializing and interacting with others in multicultural environments.

In conclusion, while teaching children their mother tongue initially has many benefits, it's important to consider the potential drawbacks as well. Parents and educators should balance language acquisition by also encouraging exposure to other languages and cultures to ensure that children develop the necessary language skills needed for successful communication and academic achievement.

The choice is up to every parent. At the end of the article, I want to provide some tips for parents who want to raise their children to be bilingual or multilingual.

### **Strategies for raising bilingual/multilingual children**

If you're a parent who is considering raising your child with multiple languages, there are several practical steps that you can take to help them develop fluency in each language. Here are some tips that can help:

1. **Start early:** Research shows that children are more adept at learning languages at a young age. It's important to start exposing them to multiple languages as soon as possible. For example, you can sing songs in different languages, talk to them in a language other than their mother tongue, or read them bilingual books.

2. **Provide parental support and encouragement:** Learning a new language can be challenging, but with parental support and encouragement, children are more likely to be motivated and successful. Praise their efforts and provide positive feedback, which can help boost their confidence.

3. **Create a language-rich environment:** The best way for a child to learn a new language is to be exposed to it in everyday life. Try to create an environment where they are surrounded by the language(s) they are learning. This can include watching foreign language cartoons or movies, playing language learning games, or listening to music in different languages.

4. **Use language learning apps:** There are several language learning apps that are designed specifically for children. These apps are interactive and fun, and can help children develop their language skills.

5. **Focus on language development rather than perfection:** Children may make mistakes when learning a new language. It's important to focus on their language development rather than achieving perfection. Encourage them to keep trying and practicing, and remind them that making mistakes is a natural part of the learning process.

6. **Take language classes:** Language classes can be a great way for children to learn a new language. These classes can be taken online or in-person and are often led by qualified instructors who can provide targeted language instruction.

Raising children with multiple languages can be a rewarding experience for both parents and children. With a combination of parental support, language-rich environments, and a variety of language learning techniques, children can develop fluency in multiple languages. Encourage them to practice and be patient, and they will be well on their way to becoming bilingual or multilingual. And be patient yourself.

**Conclusion.** Overall, there are many benefits to teaching children multiple languages from a young age, including enhanced cognitive development, better social communication abilities, and increased language acquisition skills. However, parents should also take potential drawbacks into account, such as language delay or confusion. On the other hand, focusing on teaching a child their mother tongue initially offers significant benefits, including a deeper understanding of language and stronger cultural identity. Nonetheless, parents should also be aware of potential drawbacks, such as limiting exposure to other languages and cultures. The ultimate decision depends on each family's individual needs and circumstances. However, providing consistent language exposure and encouraging language learning can benefit children greatly, regardless of the approach chosen.

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