Learning more than one language

If your family speaks a language other than English at home, you may have questions about your child's language development. If a child learns to speak or understand two languages she is **bilingual**. Learning two (or more) languages at once has special advantages for children, but there are challenges, too. Here are some things parents should think about.

BENEFITS

Language is more than just speaking or reading. The language your child speaks will help her form her identity. Children who continue to speak their first language, even though they learn English, have a special link to their family's culture. They may view themselves more positively because they know they are part of a larger cultural group.

There are benefits in learning more than one language for your child's thinking skills, too. Children who speak more than one language have been shown to have greater mental flexibility and creativity. They may transfer thoughts and ideas from one language to the other. They are often better at taking a different perspective and interacting with people from diverse backgrounds. When learning a second language strengthens the child's first language, cognitive development and self-esteem are fostered.

CHALLENGES

There are challenges for children who are learning a second language. If they are older and have learned to speak in their native language, they may struggle for a while when placed in a school or community where another language is spoken. It will take time and support from you to help your child understand that eventually he will be able to speak the new language. At first, your child may only speak in his first language. He may be silent and not attempt to speak in the new setting. He may imitate the sounds of the new language, but will not be understood because he's not really saying words.

If your child is a baby and is hearing both languages, she may pick up certain words in one language and others in the second language. It may seem like her language development is slow, but if you consider all the words in both languages, she may be ahead of children who only hear one language. But don't ignore a true language delay, either. If your child isn't saying 50 words (counting those in both languages) by the time he is 30 months old, discuss this with your Parents as Teachers parent educator.

BILINGUAL CHILDREN SUCCEED

Learning a majority language of society is important for your child's success in school and with his playmates. Strengthening his original language is important for his sense of who he is. Having bilingual citizens is a benefit for our society, as well. As a parent, you can help your child to learn two languages. Talk to your parent educator about how to support your child's bilingual language development. ❖

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