

# Bilingualism

## What is bilingualism?

Bilingualism is the use of two languages on a regular basis. A person does not have to speak both languages equally well to be considered bilingual. Children growing up bilingual develop language a little differently from children learning just one, but this is not considered a true disorder. Of course, bilingual children, just like those speaking only one language, may also have speech and/or language problems that need treatment.

## What can the speech-language pathologist (SLP) do for the bilingual child?

It is the SLP's job to determine if a child's difficulties are due to learning more than one language, or whether there is a real speech or language problem. SLPs are trained to work with children and families from different cultures and who speak different languages. The SLP will be able to decide if a bilingual child has a true language disorder, or is just showing a language difference due to the use of more than one language.

## What is meant by a language 'disorder' versus a language 'difference'?

When a child's language skills are significantly poorer than expected for his age in the native or dominant language, we say that he has a language disorder.

However, sometimes we see children who are having problems in the second language, but not in the language they use most of the time. When the 'mistakes' are typical of second-language learners, and there are age-appropriate skills in the first language, we say that the child has a language difference instead of disorder. Such children usually make rapid improvement when given help.



## How does an SLP test and treat bilingual children?

There are a number of different ways to decide if a child has a language disorder or just a language difference. Unfortunately, there are only a few speech and language tests that are written in a language other than English. Therefore, the SLP may use informal tools to see if a true language problem exists.

Following the evaluation, the SLP will decide if therapy is needed. Speech or language therapy is to help the child that has a true language disorder. If a child is found to have a language difference, the SLP might recommend English as a Second Language (ESL) services instead. These are often available in the community or through many school programs.

### How can I find out if the bilingual child needs to see a speech-language pathologist?

The pediatrician or family doctor will help decide if the child is developing language normally. If there are concerns, the doctor may ask the family to see an SLP to answer family questions. The child might need to see an SLP if:

- he has difficulty communicating and learning in any language.
- he does not interact normally with his family or other children, even using his main language.
- there are many mistakes in the first language in addition to the normal 'errors' seen in second language (such as mixing words from two languages in one sentence).



### What if a bilingual speech-language pathologist is not available?

When a bilingual SLP is not available, an interpreter will be used. Interpreters are trained to help the SLP with the evaluation. When an interpreter for a particular language is not available, an assessment of the child's play can be used instead.

### What can I do to help the bilingual child?

Here are some simple ways to help the child at home. The SLP will have other ideas, so feel free to ask for more suggestions.

**Be consistent.** It is easiest for children to use one language at home as much as possible. This language does not have to be English. For example, a family may speak Spanish at home, but use English at school and/or work. When the parents speak different languages, one parent may prefer to speak a different language than the other. This is OK. The main thing is to be consistent, so that the languages different people use are predictable. Children can become confused when clinicians or parents switch back-and-forth between languages.

**Provide a rich environment:** Whenever possible, try to provide games and books in both languages. Children like to see that they can go back and forth between languages.

**Put the child's needs first:** Children should not be forced into bilingualism if it makes them unhappy. Bilingualism needs to happen naturally and spontaneously. Play it down! Make bilingualism seem like a natural and unremarkable part of family life.

## Useful Terms about Bilingualism:

Nationally, and especially in the school system, bilingual children are often known as *English Language Learners (ELL)* or *English as a Second Language Speakers (ESL)*.

**Bilingual family:** A family in which most of the members are bilingual.

**Consecutive Bilingualism:** Learning one language after already knowing another. This is the situation for all those who become bilingual as adults. Sometimes this is also called successive bilingualism.

**Simultaneous Bilingualism:** Learning two languages as “first languages.” A person who is a simultaneous bilingual goes from speaking no languages at all to speaking two languages. Infants who are exposed to two languages from birth will become simultaneously bilingual.

**Receptive Bilingualism:** Being able to understand two languages but only speak one with others. This is not normally considered ‘true’ bilingualism, but is fairly common.

**Subtractive Language Acquisition:** When the first language is no longer used, and is replaced by a second language. This is typical in many cases of international adoption, and can make learning English very challenging.

**‘Native’ or ‘Maternal’ Language:** This is the language most used at home. A native language is the language learned by children, and passed from one generation to the next. For example, if a family speaks only Russian at home, but lives in an English-speaking community, we would call Russian their ‘native’ or ‘maternal’ language, and English their second language.

For more information, please contact the Division of Speech Pathology at (513) 636-4341 or visit our website at [www.cincinnatichildrens.org/speech](http://www.cincinnatichildrens.org/speech).