



Bilingual Language Learners

Children in a bilingual environment (bilingual in this case indicates presence of two languages, not the mastery of two languages) should meet speech and language milestones for their primary language at the same developmental age as monolingual children. “Onset of first words, early core vocabulary, and 2 word combinations are attained at the same age as monolinguals”... in normally developing bilingual children. A delay in reaching these milestones is considered a red flag for language impairment. Typically, by the age of two years, a child should have a minimum of 50 words in their speaking vocabulary and should be starting to combine words into short phrases.

In bilingual children, both languages should be supported in the presence of an identified language delay. It was previously thought that it would be better to support only the dominant language of the community at large to avoid confusion for the child i.e. English. This is no longer the view among the experts. The home language is needed to “maintain and promote family connections, cultural links, and the self identity that are necessary for positive social-emotional development and well-being. English is needed to develop and maintain positive interactions with the majority community to maximize educational and vocational opportunities and success.” Also, it is important not to ignore previously acquired knowledge, rather to continue building on knowledge in both languages.

By age 3-5 years, at least one language should be equivalent to monolingual norms in normally developing bilingual speakers. At some point there will be a shift in dominance from the child’s home language to the language of the majority community. This is a natural shift and should not be artificially encouraged at a younger age than it would normally occur. The timing of this shift is dependent on many variables.

An underlying language impairment will manifest itself in both languages in bilingual children. A bilingual child with language impairment does not have more severe deficits because of the presence of another language as compared to monolingual peers. Bilingual children with language impairment are capable of learning two languages equally as well as their monolingual language impaired peers. Most importantly, there are many ways to support language impaired children with a single minority language, even if the care provider does not have knowledge of that language.