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Bilingual head start

Children who are introduced to a second language when young are more attentive and can focus better, study finds

Parents used to believe that introducing a second language to a young child would result in language confusion, speech delay and/or reading or writing

problems in school. But researchers have found a different – and surprising – result of what bilingualism does for children.

According to a five-year study of bilingual children by the Cornell Language Acquisition Lab (CLAL), learning a second language does not result in any negative impact on cognitive abilities.

On the contrary, researchers found that the children were actually more attentive in the face of distraction than children who can speak only one language.

According to Professor Barbara Lust, a developmental psychology and linguistics expert and professor of human development and director of CLAL, that is an important finding because the ability to focus and pay attention plays a key role in academic readiness and success at school.

Prof Lust and her collaborator on the

research project, Ms Sujin Yang, a former post-doctoral research associate at the lab, have published their findings in several academic journals.

Ms Yang has been studying language acquisition in young children for over 30 years across more than 20 different languages and cultures.

Children, she said, can naturally acquire more than one language at once – and do so most quickly if immersed in the languages.

Besides the strengthened cognitive advantages of being bilingual, Ms Yang said there are other benefits:

- Social benefits. A child can access other cultures and worlds in ways that those who speak only one language cannot.
- Native-like proficiency. Early

exposure and learning of a second language give the best outcome in terms of whether the child will have a heavy accent speaking the second language.

START AT BIRTH

Here are tips from researcher Sujin Yang for parents who want their child to learn a second language early in life:

- Immerse the child in the second language as early as birth.
- Make sure you provide opportunities for him to hear the language spoken in other settings besides the home, including interactions with peers who speak the second language.
- There is no need to “teach” the child a new language. He learns spontaneously when he hears the language daily.
- Read and tell stories to the child in the second language and provide fun activities in both languages.
- Speak and promote both languages in your everyday life. Studies show that language confusion does not happen and children will naturally sort out the languages by themselves.

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