

# Growing Up *Bilingual*

Experts debunk common misconceptions  
and offer their best tips to set  
your child up for success *en español*.



BY **HOLLY PEVZNER**  
PHOTOGRAPHS BY **ERIN PATRICE O'BRIEN**

**WHEN IT CAME** to teaching her kids Spanish, Marianna Du Bosq never doubted she'd raise them to be bilingual. She is from Venezuela and spent her childhood speaking Spanish. "I did my research on the benefits of bilingualism. I even had a plan in place before my daughter was born," says Du Bosq, who lives in Alexandria, Virginia. She was prepared, but when she started noticing differences between her daughter, then 2 years old, and her monolingual friends, she started having doubts. "They were all saying more words than she was," Du Bosq recalls. But a few months later, her vocabulary blossomed—in both English and Spanish. "My daughter not only caught up, but she surpassed them."

Du Bosq's concern is not uncommon. "Many parents worry that bilingualism causes developmental language disorders. It doesn't," says Elizabeth D. Peña, Ph.D., director of the Human Abilities in Bilingual Language Acquisition Laboratory at the University of California, Irvine.

While Du Bosq was able to ride out her concerns, it's not easy for everyone. "Especially when people such as doctors, speech-language pathologists, and teachers perpetuate myths," Dr. Peña says. The best way to squelch misconceptions? Arm yourself with the facts. Here, we burst through the most common bilingual hurdles to help your child soar *en ingles y en español*.

## MYTH

### 1 Learning two languages is too confusing.

"I heard it from everyone—even from my oldest's preschool teacher," says Sonia Smith-Kang, in Los Angeles. "They'd say, 'It's going to be so difficult and confusing to raise the kids with more than one language.'" But as a Mexican/African-American mom who grew up speaking Spanish, Smith-Kang felt strongly about passing her family's language on to her four kids. And so did her husband, who is Korean. Do they regularly flop back and forth between English, Spanish, and Korean? Sure. Are they confused? No.

"It's the adults who are confused and

¿Como se dice  
“Does this  
bag go with these  
shoes?”



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misinterpret a child's natural learning process as misunderstanding," says Alejandro E. Brice, Ph.D., professor of secondary/ESOL education and communication sciences and disorders at the University of South Florida in St. Petersburg. "Between 50 and 80 percent of the world's population is bilingual. Do you think all of those people are confused? Of course not." Instead, what is perceived as confusion—code-mixing, or using words from two languages in one sentence—is merely a sign that children are copying what they hear in their own families, according to a 2013 study in *LEARNING Landscapes*. It also shows resourcefulness.

"Bilingual children are making use of the tools that they have, which means they pull from two languages," Dr. Brice explains. "Sometimes it's easier to convey a message in one language than in another language."

Also, all young children make errors as they learn, and for bilingual kids, struggles in English may be influenced by Spanish. "In Spanish, *no tiene* translates to 'he or she no have,' and to a child, that structure is more logical than the word *doesn't*," Dr. Peña says. At the same time, Spanish adjectives appear after a noun: *Carro rojo* literally translates to "car red," so a child might

say, "I want car red" because they're mapping Spanish onto English. "If a child doesn't know the correct forms, it looks as if they don't have a good handle on grammar, but they might still be learning," Dr. Peña says.

#### MYTH

### 2 It's impossible for a child to learn Spanish if only one parent speaks it.

"It would be much easier if my husband spoke Spanish too," says Mexican-American Maria Palazzolo, mom of 5-year-old Massimo, in Long Beach, California. Palazzolo is right; it's easier if both parents speak the language, but that doesn't mean you can't succeed. "You can do it with one parent," Dr. Brice says. "But it certainly requires a lot of work, discipline, and outside help."

Luckily for Palazzolo, her mother, who doesn't know English, lives close by. "We see her a couple of times a week—she and Massimo are always in the kitchen cooking together," Palazzolo says. "She asks him to bring her ingredients and to help peel vegetables. He asks her to taste things." Not only does Massimo have to use Spanish in order to communicate with his abuela, but he's also doing something he really loves. And that's the one-two punch that bilingual kids require.

"You should put children in Spanish-speaking circumstances that are enjoyable but also where they must use the language in order to communicate," explains Erika Hoff, Ph.D., the principal investigator at the Language

Development Lab at Florida Atlantic University in Davie. "It's important for them to see that speaking Spanish has a functional value." If you can't get that fun-and-function combo with nearby family, options such as heritage-language classes, immersion schools, and bilingual playgroups provide that interaction.

To address this need, Palazzolo started her own Spanish-based early-education program, The Family Nest, when Massimo was nearly 2. "I wanted to give my son and the community more opportunities to speak Spanish in a fun environment," she says. Her classes—from cooking to science—are taught in Spanish 95 percent of the time. "We create a lot of friendships here too, so families continue speaking Spanish together outside of class."

#### MYTH

### 3 Bilingual children struggle in school.

"When Noah was in kindergarten, his teacher would remark that he was behind the other kids with reading," recalls Danella Garcia, a Venezuelan-American mom of two in Brooklyn, New York. "Plus, other people had commented that Noah was not speaking clearly for his age." While Noah's teacher never explicitly pointed her finger at his bilingualism, Garcia suspected that might be the issue, because she was speaking only Spanish at home. "I have friends and family who stopped pushing Spanish on their

## Autism's Bilingual Benefit

While autism often involves speech delays, there's no evidence that exposing an autistic child to multiple languages makes it worse. In fact, bilingual autistics have more cognitive flexibility than monolingual peers do, according to new findings in *Child Development*. For the study, monolingual and bilingual autistic kids were asked to sort pictures by shape and then switch and sort them by color. Bilingual children performed better than the other kids, which is significant because autistic children often have difficulty switching gears. It's thought that the mental flexibility exercised when using two languages primes the brain to adapt to other shifting circumstances. "Our study shows that holding autistic children back from learning a second language might limit their opportunities," says senior study author, Aparna Nadig, Ph.D. "Now we know that the cognitive flexibility in bilingualism may extend to children who have autism spectrum disorder too."

children when similar bumps at school occurred,” she says. But Garcia refused to do the same and instead enrolled Noah in a dual-language program where his language development flourished.

“It’s not all that unusual for bilingual children to appear to be delayed and have temporary academic issues,” Dr. Brice says. For example, a bilingual preschooler might not know as many English words as his monolingual classmates do, but that’s probably because his words are divided across two languages. “We need to look at a child’s skills as a whole,” Dr. Brice says. “A parent should be concerned only if the child cannot express himself adequately in any or both languages combined.”

At the same time, bilingual children might experience a temporary lag in learning to read. “They’re juggling two sound systems simultaneously that don’t perfectly mesh,” Dr. Brice says. This means that sounds in one language don’t always appear in the second language. For instance, the *sh* sound does not occur in Spanish. So a child who has been speaking mostly Spanish might substitute the *sh* sound with the closest approximation, *ch*. “Being able to identify and say these sounds is called phonemic awareness, and it’s a prerequisite for being able to read,” Dr. Brice says.

The good news? In the absence of an actual reading impairment (which would be noticeable in both languages), phonemic awareness is a skill that bilingual kids can learn relatively quickly with proper instruction, according to a report in *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*. “These children often just need time, good exposure, the ability to practice, and support from home and school,” Dr. Brice says.

Moreover, numerous studies have shown that bilingualism benefits children’s cognitive, social, and communications skills. A 2017 report in the journal *Developmental Science* found that, when compared with monolingual children, bilingual preschoolers have greater inhibitory control, which is the ability to put a cap on impulsive reactions, such as yelling out answers in class or getting up during circle time. When bilingual children choose to speak in their second language, they’re



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suppressing their knee-jerk reaction to respond in their dominant language. Another bonus: Bilingual children also appear to have a stronger working memory, which encompasses reading comprehension and arithmetic computing, than their monolingual peers have, according to a 2013 study of 5- to 7-year-olds in the *Journal of Experimental Child Psychology*.

### MYTH

## 4 Kids automatically pick up Spanish if they hear it from their parents.

“Children aren’t sponges,” Dr. Hoff says. “There’s nothing magical in a child’s brain that allows her to soak up language she hears without a lot of environmental support.” The thing is, before children start school or day care, it can easily appear as though they’re effortlessly absorbing language. “I really thought that if I simply spoke Spanish to my children, they’d pick it up,” says Marina Ilari, of Milwaukee. And they did. When the Argentinian-American mom was home with Santino, 5, and Nina, 2, Spanish was always the dominant language and the kids were fluent. But as soon as Nina entered day care and Santino began preschool, things changed. “They would both come home preferring English, so their Spanish started slipping,” Ilari says.

“While it’s not an exact science, children need to experience about 30 to

40 percent exposure to a second language in order to become and remain fluent,” Dr. Brice notes. Once children enter an English-dominant school, that balance takes a hit. “I knew at that point that I needed to get creative so we could hold on to Spanish,” Ilari says. She started scheduling regular playdates with fellow bilingual families. “We encourage the kids to speak Spanish as they play,” she says. The children might prefer to switch to English when the moms aren’t paying attention, but it still helps to expose them to Spanish. “Having the model of other Spanish-speaking kids helps children feel that they’re not the odd person out, which is important once kids are school-age and surrounded by so much English,” Dr. Peña says.

Also important? Playing an active part in your child’s bilingual immersion by meeting him at his level. Palazzolo would fill up a kiddie pool with sand and add things like apples, spoons, and seashells. “I would name the objects as Massimo explored them,” she recalls. “Not only did he hear the words, but he also felt and held the objects, which made the connection much more real.” Similarly, Ilari decided that all of the kids’ toys ‘spoke’ only Spanish. “With Santino, I play a lot with cars, and each one has a different voice, but they all speak only Spanish,” says Ilari. “If he replies in English, I pretend the car is not understanding until he tries in Spanish.” That—plus the Spanish-language storytime, sing-alongs, and TV shows—adds up to learning.

No matter what bumps lie ahead on the road to bilingualism, Du Bosq encourages perspective and support—and not just for the child. “While my daughter needs to be around other bilingual children and immersed in a supportive atmosphere, I need other bilingual parents too. It might even be more important for me,” she says. To that end, right around the time her daughter began to speak, Du Bosq started *Bilingual Avenue*, a podcast for parents. “Being surrounded by other bilingual families helps everyone feel less alone and more motivated on this journey. Plus, we can remind one another that this is indeed worth it. It will make a world of difference in our children’s lives.” ●