

Benefits of Bilingualism for Children

No drawbacks, despite long-standing claims

- Research-based claims of the negative effects of bilingualism are largely rooted in xenophobic attitudes and weak methodology. (Bialystock, 2008; Athanasopoulos, 2011)
- It does not interfere with learning of quantitative concepts, although bilingual children do take more time to solve math problems presented in the weaker language. (Bialystock, 2009)
- Bilingual children tend to have a smaller vocabulary in each language, but this is balanced by other linguistic advantages (see “Meta-linguistic understanding”). (Bialystock, 2009)

Clear benefits in higher cognitive function across domains

Executive functions

- Executive function includes self-control and self-awareness, which are associated with better performance in the classroom. (Yoshida, 2008)
- Bilingual children perform better on tasks that require focused attention and inhibition of irrelevant information. Accelerated development of these abilities may be related to the need to suppress one language while the other is being used. (Yoshida, 2008; Adescope, 2010)
- “Theory of mind” – the understanding that attitudes and beliefs are constructed by an individual with a unique perspective, different from one’s own – also tends to develop earlier. (Goetz, 2003; Farhadian, 2010; Adescope, 2010)

Communication and linguistics

- Meta-linguistics is the understanding of structures of language and the ability to separate language from the objects and concepts it describes, and bilingual children show accelerated development of this skill compared to monolingual children. (Adescope, 2010; Bialystock, 2008)
- They also show greater flexibility in language use, including increased ability to acquire new words with meanings close to those of previously known words. (Yoshida, 2008; Bialystock, 2008)
- Bilingual children tend to have greater sensitivity to the impact of their communication on others, which may contribute to higher social and emotional intelligence. (Athanasopoulos, 2011)

Creative and divergent thinking

- Bilingual children perform better on brainstorming tasks, such as word association or coming up with as many uses as possible for an everyday object. (Athanasopoulos, 2011; Bialystock, 2008)
- Researchers believe that access to multiple languages provides a richer network of associations to draw upon and greater capacity to consider multiple ideas simultaneously.

Brain benefits throughout life

- Learning a second language increases density of grey matter in the brain, with the greatest increase seen when the language is acquired at early and taken to a high proficiency level. (Mechelli, 2004)
- Bilingual seniors who continue to use both languages experience slower cognitive decline and later onset of Alzheimer’s than monolingual seniors. (Bialystock, 2008)

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