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A World of Words: How Multiple Languages Affect Children



Exposure to a number of languages when one is a child can have a significant impact on the way that they acquire and progress in their language abilities. There is the view that teaching children more than one language may confuse them or hinder their language development, but research has proven that this is not the case. It is possible for children to learn several languages from a young age, and growing up in an environment with different languages can aid the development of valuable communication and thinking skills.

A way in which learning more than one language influences children is that it enables them to develop distinct language systems. As Fred Genesee, a researcher, pointed out, bilingual children are able to distinguish between their two languages from an early age and learn when to

use each one (Genesee 161–79). That is to say, acquiring two languages does not necessarily confuse children; on the contrary, children can learn different sounds, words, and grammatical rules for each language.

Although bilingual children may at times appear to know fewer words in each language than children who speak only one language, this does not indicate that their total vocabulary is smaller. Erika Hoff and her colleagues discovered that when the words that bilingual children know in both languages are added together, their overall vocabulary can be similar to that of monolingual

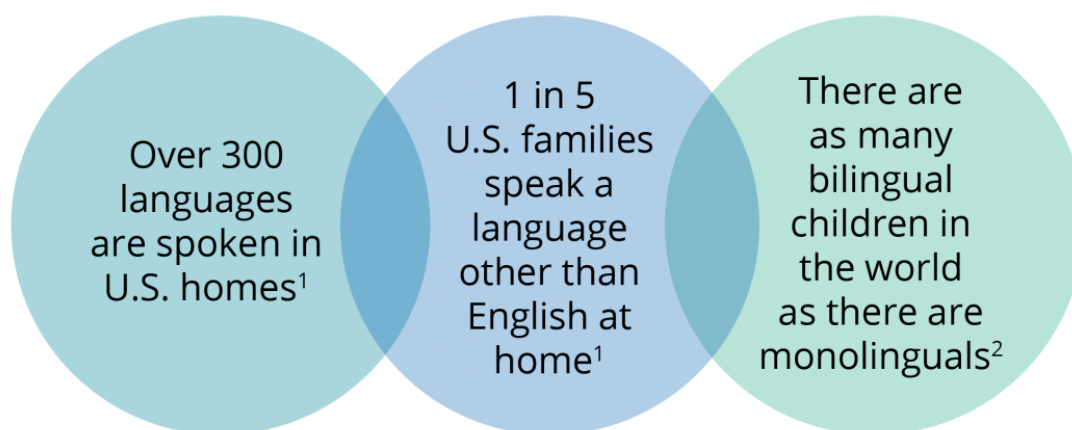
children (Hoff et al.).

The words are just spread out between the two languages; for instance, a child might know the



word for 'dog' in one language but learn a different word in the other language.

The amount of time that children spend being exposed to each language is also a factor. As Laia Fibla and her colleagues have found, children gain the most when they regularly hear and use both languages in situations that are meaningful (Fibla et al.). A child who hears one language every day but only sometimes hears the other will most likely end up being more proficient in the language that they hear more frequently. Erika Hoff also states that the people that children come into contact with and the kind of language they hear can influence how quickly their language skills develop (Hoff).



Multiple languages can also offer advantages beyond language development. Research carried out by Zoe Liberman and her team indicates that exposure to several languages may enhance communication skills and help children to better understand other people's points of view (Liberman et al.). A different study by Ioulia Kovelman and her colleagues showed that early exposure to two languages can assist with skills connected to reading and the understanding of language sounds (Kovelman et al.).

In general, becoming familiar with several languages from an early age can have a positive impact on a child's linguistic development. Even if bilingual children learn the various languages in different ways or at different rates, being exposed to more than one language does not confuse them. As long as they have consistent exposure and practice, children are able to learn more than one language while at the same time developing important communication and literacy skills.

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