talking matters

Bilingual and multilingual development



MYTHS & FACTS

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What is bilingual/ multilingual development?

When a child grows up bilingual or multilingual it means that they are learning two or more languages at once.
Children can develop bilingual or multilingual language skills in many different ways, and there is a broad range of what is considered typical in terms of their language development.

Tamariki who grow up in language-rich environments will develop as competent, confident and creative communicators in all of their languages.
Bilingualism and multilingualism extends beyond words into embodied participation in the Language Environment.
Prioritising rich and responsive interactions, connection, participation and communication in all its forms supports brain and language development.
Providing opportunities for quality language exposure helps tamariki make sense of the world around them and develop a strong sense of identity and culture. Language is a window into our experience.



It's normal to speak more than one language. In fact, more than half of the world's population speak at least two languages!

Why does it matter?

- In Aotearoa New Zealand there are currently 200 different languages in use and more tamariki are growing up bilingual and multilingual each year. As the adults in their lives, and their most important 'resource' for language learning, it's important to learn how we can support them to thrive as communicators in all their languages.

- There are many benefits to developing and maintaining bilingualism/ multilingualism. Cognitive, socioemotional, academic and economic benefits later in life are only some of the most common ones. Growing up bilingual/ multilingual supports learning, relationships, and a stronger cultural identity particularly when one of the languages is a heritage language – the language of our culture.

- Research across disciplines (e.g., psycholinguistics, pedagogy, etc.) have found that if a child has a strong base in their home language (e.g. Spanish), they will learn the second or dominant language (e.g. English) much more quickly and easily. However, myths around language confusion and other disadvantages can persist in current beliefs. Knowing about current research is important to empower whānau to use and pass on all their languages to tamariki.



Myth #1

Using more than one language is confusing for pre-verbal babies. We should wait until they are older to introduce another language

Facts

Babies and young tamariki are capable of learning many languages at the same time, it's not confusing. Research shows that our brains are especially wired for learning language from before birth to around three years old.
We don't need to wait. Tamariki are learning and adapting to language even before they are born.

Myth #2

Children with developmental delays cannot learn more than one language

Facts

Research says that children with developmental delays are capable of learning and using both languages and are not confused.
Tamariki with developmental delays benefit from learning two languages, same as everyone else.
It is important to ensure that children will be supported to communicate effectively in all their languages.

Myth #3

If children speak different languages at home it will be harder to learn to read and write in English at school.

Facts

Quality language exposure in the early years is key. When whānau share all they know in the language they're most comfortable with they help tamariki grow their early literacy skills and build the foundations for learning in any language.

Research says that tamariki who grow up bilingual benefit academically. Speaking two languages helps them develop thinking and reasoning skills that are important for learning and school work.

Children will usually hear lots of English and pick it up over time. Exposing children to English speaking environments supports second language learning. But rich experiences in home languages provide the best foundations for literacy.

Myth #4

I shouldn't use reo Māori with tamariki while I'm learning as I will teach them my mistakes

Facts

It's beneficial to share any reo Māori that you know. Tamariki who are speakers of te reo Māori are crucial for its survival. Hearing te reo Māori, especially in the early years, will support them to use and see it as valuable.

It is important that our tamariki hear and use the language so it is normalised.

Bilingualism is a continuum and it doesn't mean we don't make mistakes in any of the languages. Modeling language learning as something positive is a great way to encourage it.

Be learners together!

Myth #5

bi/multilingual children are confused when they mix their languages together

Facts

This is called code-switching.
It is a normal strategy bilingual and multilingual brains use and rather than confusion, it shows mastery. Developing brains are adapting and growing to use more than one language.
Research says tamariki who code-switch have a rich understanding of both languages. It shows their proficiency to understand sentence structures of both languages and adapt their language to different places and people with great sensitivity.

Myth #6

Bilingual/ multilingual children are likely to need speech & language therapy

Facts

Bilingualism does not cause or contribute to speech, language or communication difficulties.
Bilingual children are not at a higher risk of needing therapy than children who speak one language only.
The key to children thriving as communicators, is experiencing quality interactions in all their languages.

Myth #7

Bilingual/ multilingual tamariki are likely to have slower language development

Facts

Research shows bilingual tamariki develop communication skills at the same pace as their monolingual peers. While it may seem like one language is not at the same level as the other, when we combine the skills of both or all the languages, they are at a similar level to their peers who speak only one language.

The key is providing quality experiences and considering their skills across all their languages.

Bilingualism and multilingualism in developing brains - more facts



Bilingual developing children are brainy

Bilingual tamariki experience cognitive, socioemotional, academic and even economic benefits later in life. Growing up bilingual/multilingual supports learning, relationships, and a stronger cultural identity when one of the languages is a heritage language – the language of our culture.



Sharing heart languages with tamariki won't hold them back or confuse them

'Heart language' includes mother tongue, home language or heritage language; it is the language(s) through which a child first experiences emotional connection, cultural identity and social understanding.

When assessing bilingual or multilingual children's communication development we need to look at their skills across all their languages. For example, combining their vocabulary from reo Māori and English will help us get a good idea about where they're really at.

It is more common to be stronger in one language than equally fluent in both and that can change over time. Providing rich language experiences in all their languages will support learning.

In addition to ensuring exposure to rich interactive opportunities, it is important to encourage tamariki to share their languages. They need as much practice listening as speaking to develop receptive and expressive skills in all their languages.



There are many ways of 'being' and growing up bilingual or multilingual

There is such a variety of ways to support children's bilingual/multilingual development. Being curious and finding what works for each whānau and focusing on sharing rich and responsive interactions is the best way to support them. Talk with whānau about how they can share what they know, seek support when needed, and think about what helps them share all their languages.

Supporting bilingual and multilingual whānau and/or tamariki

If you speak the same language

- Prioritise the minority language. Use rich language in context.
- Trust what works for you and your/ the tamariki.
- Encourage practicing listening AND speaking skills. Invite participation in interaction.
- Support beyond words. Language is experienced and learned through music, movement, play.

If you don't speak the same language/ are still learning

- Be curious. Learn about what children communicate about and how.
- Partner with children and be learners together. Learn a few words or phrases so you can use them and encourage them to use them in interaction (translanguaging).
- Partner with whānau to find what works for them.
- Support beyond words. Language is experienced and learned through music, movement, play.



Shared enjoyment and fun are key!

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