

Myth



Using more than one language is confusing for babies. I should wait until they're older



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.

About bilingualism

More information

- Babies are learning about language very early on. In fact, new born babies are able to recognise the sound of different languages.
- Babies are born able to make from any of the world's languages, so they are ready and able to learn any language in the world. In the first year they tune into the sounds they hear most often and start to play with them to form their first words. Those sounds are used to make their first words. So the earlier we nurture all their languages the better!
- By the age of 2 years old, bilingual toddlers are able to tell what language they need to respond in with different adults. This shows their emotional intelligence and maturity at a young age.

To learn more, check out these links:

- Being bilingual in Aotearoa - <https://brainwave.org.nz/article/being-bilingual-learning-two-languages/>
- A Talking Matters short film about a family who speaks 3 or 4 languages, 'Natural Born Einsteins': <https://vimeo.com/764015656> or scan the QR code



Myth



Bilingualism slows down language learning



Facts



Not true. Research shows bilingual tamariki develop communication skills at the same rate as children who speak one language.

While it may seem like one language is not at the same level as the other, when we combine the skills of both their languages, they are at a similar level to their peers who speak only one language.

Bilingual tamariki generally reach a similar level to their peers by ages 4-6, so long as we are providing quality experiences in both languages.

About bilingualism

More information



- If you're only observing one language in a bilingual child, then it may appear that they are behind. But when you combine both their languages, they have a similar or bigger vocabulary than a child who speaks one language. We need to consider what they know in both languages to look at the language development of bilingual children.
- It is normal for tamariki to go through a 'quiet period' when they are in an environment with a new language. It doesn't mean their language learning has slowed down, it means they are doing a lot of listening and observing to soak up all the new language. For example, it's normal for a child who speaks Sāmoan at home to go through a 'quiet period' when they start school in English. But they will catch up in a few months. The stronger their foundation in their first language, the easier it is to learn a second language.
- Skills learned in one language can be used in the other. For example, you can learn math in one language, but you don't need to learn math all over again in another language, you just need to learn the words for numbers and concepts - like 'subtraction' and 'addition'.
- When we provide quality language experiences in all the languages we want our tamariki to speak, they will thrive as language learners.

Myth



Bilingual children are likely to need speech-language therapy



Facts



Bilingualism does not cause or contribute to speech, language or communication difficulties.

Bilingual children develop at similar rates and 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.

About bilingualism

More information



- There is a common misconception that children who learn more than one language will be delayed in talking. This idea is disproven by research time and time again.
- When a child who is learning two languages develops a language or speech difficulty, being bilingual won't be the cause. Something else might be going on.
- When there is a need for extra language support, the difficulty in speech or language will often be evident in both of the child's languages. It is ideal to seek assessment and help for both languages the child is learning.
- In some cases, the difficulty will present in one language only due to language differences. For example, a child who speaks English and te reo Māori might find it hard to pronounce the sound 'S'. That difficulty will only present in English, only because there's no sound 'S' in te reo Māori.

Myth



Bilingual children are confused when they mix their languages together.



Facts



This is called code-switching. It is a normal stage of bilingual development and it doesn't mean they are confused. Their 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.

About bilingualism

More information



- Code-switching may help bilingual children develop both their languages, especially the one they feel less confident with.
- When children have not yet mastered either language, mixing both languages helps them explore and use both languages to get their point across.
- Even when bilingual children are proficient in both languages, they can use code-switching in creative ways to express themselves around other people who speak those two languages. Mixing languages in this way requires a deep understanding of how each language works!

To learn more, check out these links:

- Code-switching as a marker of linguistic competence in bilingual children:
<https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/bilingualism-language-and-cognition/article/codeswitching-as-a-marker-of-linguistic-competence-in-bilingual-children/DE93C61F10B151AD5EC248E8D0EB5006>
- Watch Hawaiki and his dad Tamy code-switching in this video
<https://vimeo.com/764015656> or scan the QR code



Myth



Parents should stick to speaking one language each to avoid confusing the child.

For example, Mum would speak Spanish and Dad would speak English



Facts



There is no evidence that this is the best or only way to raise bilingual children.

Research shows that when parents use more than one language each, tamariki communicate effectively in both. Most parents speak both languages under some conditions, even parents who are firmly committed to maintaining a clear 'one parent - one language' approach.

About bilingualism

More information

- The 'one parent - one language approach' is only one possible option. There are lots of strategies that families can use to grow bilingual or multilingual tamariki. It is helpful to learn about what kind of approaches are out there so you can create a language plan for your family. Every family is different and only you will know what approach works best for you.
- One bilingual strategy that can be supportive is choosing a time or place for each language. Such as dinner time, at the marae, bed time, or in the car. This can be especially helpful for whānau (family) who are learning te reo Māori or indigenous languages so that their tamariki (children) can grow up more confident in their language, culture and identity.

To learn more, check out this link:

- Language Matters: Choosing a family language policy that works for your whānau - <https://www.stuff.co.nz/national/126547485/language-matters-choosing-a-family-language-policy-that-works-for-your-whnau>

Myth



I shouldn't use te 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 the survival of the language. Using te reo Māori at home, especially in the early years, will support them to use it and see it as valuable.

Most whānau who use te reo Māori at home are learning and working towards fluency themselves. Mistakes are normal when learning any language and tamariki may pick up what we share.

However, it is more important that our tamariki hear and use the language so it is normalised - be learners together!

About bilingualism

More information



- The more tamariki hear their languages and the more people they hear speaking them, the more likely they are to learn them. So whether you know a little of te reo Māori, or a lot, sharing that with your tamariki will help them learn it. And this is the same for all other languages.
- When we expose tamariki to fluent speakers of te reo Māori, it will support them to self-correct over time.
- If you are a learner of te reo Māori, you can share te reo Māori books, sing waiata Māori and karakia. Pukapuka are a great resource to introduce new kupu (words) and grammar.

To learn more, check out this link:

- Being bilingual: learning two languages - <https://brainwave.org.nz/article/being-bilingual-learning-two-languages/>

Myth



I should stop using my home language so my child can learn English



Facts



Children are capable of learning more than one language and there are many benefits to sharing your home language with your children.

Researchers have found that if a child has a strong base in their home language (like Spanish), they will learn the second language (like English) much more quickly and easily.

By sharing rich experiences in your home language, you give your children a strong base to learn other languages.

About bilingualism

More information

- Rich communication and language experiences grow brains. By having quality interactions in your home language you help your child build the neural pathways needed to learn other languages. If your child is strong in their home language, they will have the building blocks for learning others.
- Being able to communicate in their home language also contributes to a strong sense of culture and identity. Tamariki will benefit from being active in their cultural community and being able to communicate with their family and friends, which is an important part of healthy child development.
- There are many benefits to growing and maintaining bilingualism. Research found that teenagers who speak more than one language tend to have a bigger surface area of their brain than teenagers who speak just one language. This is important because it tells us that being bilingual could help protect young people against stress.

To learn more, check out these links:

- Being bilingual: learning two languages - <https://brainwave.org.nz/article/being-bilingual-learning-two-languages/>
- Are we failing our youngest dual language learners?: New data insights on child care language environments - <https://www.lena.org/dual-language-learners-in-child-care/>

Myth



If we speak our language at home, our child will not learn how to read and write in English or do well at school



Facts



Research says that bilingual tamariki reach the same English level as their peers by the ages of 4 - 6. This depends on the age at which they start hearing a second language.

Quality language exposure in the early years is key. Sharing as much as we know in the language we're most comfortable with helps children grow their skills and build the foundations for communication in any language.

Tamariki will usually hear a lot of English and will pick it up over time. For example, English is often heard at school, the supermarket, in the playground. Exposing children to English speaking environments will support second language learning.

About bilingualism

Myth



If we speak our language at home, our child will not learn how to read and write in English or do well at school



Facts



Quality language exposure in the early years is key. Sharing as much as we know in the language we're most comfortable with helps children 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.

About bilingualism

More information

talking
matters

- Researchers have found that if a child has a strong base in their home language (e.g. Spanish), they will learn the second language (e.g. English) much more quickly and easily. The skills from their first language are useful as they learn a new language. To set your child up for success as language learners, it is important to provide rich language experiences in your home language. Share what you know!
- Language development milestones happen at different times for each child - There is a huge range of 'normal' and it is common for tamariki who are learning two languages to have one obvious dominant language, especially in the early years.
- It's uncommon for tamariki to develop at the same pace in two languages. With quality language experiences in both languages, children can learn as much in their second language as in their first one over time.

To learn more, check out these links:

- Pasifika Education Community: Being Bilingual - <https://pasifika.tki.org.nz/LEAP/Being-bilingual>
- <https://www.sunnydays.com/blog/myths-bilingualism#:~:text=Myth%3A%20Bilingual%20Children%20Confuse%20Languages&text=Although%20switching%20between%20languages%20may,not%20a%20cause%20for%20concern.>

Myth



Children with developmental disabilities cannot learn two languages.



Facts



Research says that children with developmental disabilities are capable of learning and using both languages and are not confused.

Tamariki with developmental disabilities 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.

About bilingualism

More information



- Quality language experiences are the key from an early age! Tamariki are able to learn and use all their languages, whether they're diagnosed with Down syndrome, autism, a specific language impairment, or not. Their language development benefits from the rich interactions they experience with important adults in their life.
- In some cases, adults speak less to children who tend to respond less. This reduces the quantity and quality of interactions that children experience, limiting their communication and language development potential. All tamariki benefit from interacting in all their languages. Even if they are not responding as much as you would like, it's beneficial for them to hear others communicating with them.
- If a bilingual child has speech and language difficulties, they will be caused for reasons other than bilingualism. The same number of children who speak one language need speech-language therapy as those who speak two or more. Bilingualism does not cause the need for extra speech-language support.

To learn more, check out this link:

- <https://www.sunnydays.com/blog/myths-bilingualism#:~:text=Myth%3A%20Bilingual%20Children%20Confuse%20Languages&text=Although%20switching%20between%20languages%20may,not%20a%20cause%20for%20concern.>