

## On the Disadvantages of Parents Ceasing to Speak the Birth Language with Bilingual Language Impaired Children

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Despite significant advances in the fields of education and speech pathology, many harmful myths pertaining to multilingualism continue to persist. **One particularly infuriating and patently incorrect recommendation to parents is the advice to stop speaking the birth language with their bilingual children with language disorders.**

There is a plethora of evidence available regarding how bilingualism facilitates, increases, and improves language gains in children with developmental language disorders (DLD) as well as genetic conditions and syndromes (e.g., ASD, DS, FXS, etc.) Numerous researchers have released results of studies indicating the advantages of being bilingual for language impaired children (see this issue of [Journal of Communication Disorders](#) for starters for some studies on this subject).

But today in addition to briefly reiterating these [advantages](#), I'd like to also explicitly discuss **the disadvantages**, which can result when parents are told to stop speaking the birth language with their language impaired children and switch to English-only interactions.



Cognitive advantages of maintaining the birth language for bilingual children with language impairments (whose parents are able to provide them with that opportunity in the home) include **increased attentional control and working memory, as well as perspective taking abilities**. Linguistic advantages include **increased awareness of vocabulary and grammar**. Even **social skills** of these children **have been reported to be more advanced as compared to monolingual only peers** (See [Pena, 2016, pp. 88-89](#) for a review of pertinent studies)

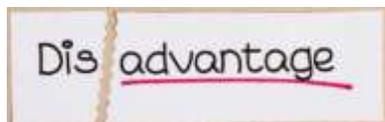
But what happens when parents decide to speak English only to their language impaired bilingual child? In the words of Helen Lester's 'Pookins', lots! And I don't mean it in a good way!

—Research indicates that children with language disorders will have language deficits in all the languages that they speak. As such, no matter which language is being used, the child will still present with some difficulty acquiring it and will do so at a much slower pace ([Kohnert, 2010](#)).

The problem is that NOT using the native language, can limit language and early literacy practices at home during sensitive periods of language acquisition. This will result in poorer language outcomes as compared to bilingual language impaired peers whose birth language continued to be supported at home. ([Ijalba, 2010](#))

“There is also evidence to show that young minority L1 learners with impaired language systems are even more vulnerable than unaffected bilingual peers to loss or early plateaus in the home language if it is not supported ([Hakansson, Salameh, & Nettelbladt, 2003](#); [Restrepo & Kruth, 2001](#); [Salameh, Hakansson, & Nettelbladt, 2004](#)).” ([Kohnert, 2010, p. 8](#))

“Minority-language families are especially affected since English is usually recommended as the target language.” ([Yu, 2016, p. 424](#)) Some studies have reported that: “parents expressed **personal loss and sadness** ([Fernandez y Garcia et al., 2012](#)) if they chose to speak only English to their child with ASD.” Other studies have reported that “some [parents] also **expressed discomfort** and difficulty when speaking a non-native language with their child ([Yu, 2013](#)) or said they **talked less frequently** to their child when they used the majority language because **it felt less natural**.” ([Bird, Genesee, Verhoeven, 2016, p. 5](#))



Perhaps the most disturbing findings are the studies that show that eliminating speaking birth language at home causes an emotional disconnect between **immediate and extended** family members and the child in question ([Kouritzin, 1999](#); [Tseng & Fuligni, 2000](#); [Wharton et al 2000](#)). Wharton and colleagues found that immigrant parents were more affective and engaging with their autistic children when they used their native language ([Wharton et al \(2000\)](#)). Contrastingly, [Kremer-Sadlik \(2005\)](#) found

that parents are less likely to engage their children in conversation when they cannot use their native language and that it further isolates a child who needs help with interactive skills.

“The advice to stick with a language that the family doesn’t speak well only intensifies the alienation experienced by these children.” “You’re taking a child who is already socially isolated and you’re making them even more isolated”. Consequently, “development of heritage languages and bilingual competencies may be especially important for children with ASD given their core challenges in socialization, communication, and relational development.” (Yu, 2016, p. 434)

Given the combined results of the above studies, it is hugely important for professionals to appropriately support the parents of bilingual children with language and learning needs when it comes to offering them relevant recommendations on the topic of language use in the home. This can be accomplished by sharing with them the synthesis of currently available studies on the topic of bilingualism and language disorders, as well as encouraging them to speak the birth language in the home if they are willing and able to, rather than embracing English only practices, which may result in significant detrimental effects for both bilingual children and their families.

#### Select Parent-Friendly Resources:

- [Myth vs. Fact: Bilingual Language Development \(The Hola Blog\)](#)
- [For children with autism, multiple languages may be a boon \(Spectrum Magazine\)](#)
- [Family Resources \(Colorin Colorado\)](#)
- [Supporting Bilingual Children With Special Education Needs \(An interview with Elizabeth Kay-Raining Bird in Psychology Today\)](#)

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