

# BILINGUALISM



## A GUIDE FOR SCHOOLS

Bilingualism refers to individuals who have, or are acquiring, communicative skills in 2 or more languages. It is the norm in many countries worldwide and has many long term advantages.

### Social benefits

Bilingual children have access to 2 cultures. They understand at an earlier age that other people may have a different perspective from their own. Bilingual people often find it easier to travel and find a job.

### Linguistic benefits

Bilingual children 'notice' how language works. Having two different language systems makes the structure of language clearer to the child. Therefore they find it easier to pick up other languages.

### Cognitive benefits

Due to their experience of switching between languages bilingual people tend to have good selective attention control. This means they are good at multitasking and can have good mathematical abilities.

# Normal features of bilingualism

Silent period. It is normal for children to go through a 'silent period' where they say very little in school. This can last for several months as they settle into a new environment.

Dysfluency. Children will often experience a period of non-fluency (stammering) as they learn to use the second language.

Vocabulary. They may use a lot of 'empty' words/fillers e.g. 'thingy', 'um'. This should phase out as their vocabulary in the new language increases.

Code switching. They may use sentences from different languages in one conversation.

Code mixing. The child may also mix the two languages in one sentence.



## Frequently asked questions

What advice should I give parents?

"Children need to hear enough of both languages. If parents speak English at home, and are not confident in it, the child could be deprived of language input in the most crucial years. Advise parents to speak the language/s they feel most confident in."

Is it ok for children to speak in their home language when they are at school?

"Yes. It is important to value the child's home language and culture. Frequent switching between languages also enhances mental flexibility"

## Strategies to help children in the classroom

- Familiarise yourself with the languages and cultures of the children in your class.
- Get down to the child's level, so that they can see your face and see you're listening.
- Use your voice to emphasise important words and information, and repeat key words.
- Use visual cues (facial expression, gesture, signs, symbols, pictures) to support verbal message.
- Keep your language simple. Shorten your instructions and use familiar vocabulary.
- Children may benefit from small group work, targeting specific vocabulary. However, the most important thing is for the child to be totally immersed in a language-rich environment i.e. the classroom.

Remember, children will need approximately 2 years of exposure to English to acquire fluency in everyday conversation. Give the child time to adapt to the school routine and become familiar with English. Advice should be sought if there are concerns about the development of the child's first language.

For further advice or information please contact us at: