

Dual Language Learners



Primed and Ready to Learn

Hearing Language is Learning

Babies are born “citizens of the world.” Children can tell the difference between all the sounds in all the world’s languages at birth. By the time they turn one year old, infants have become “language specialists.” At 10 to 12 months, infants no longer hear the differences between sounds in other languages. They excel in distinguishing sounds in their home language. The sounds that children “keep” depend on what languages they hear at a young age.

While infants are listening and learning, their brains are forming connections. A child’s brain grows faster in the first few months and years of life than it will at any other time. As infants hear more sounds from their home language(s), their brain connections become stronger. Infants also become better at recognizing the sounds of their home languages. Children who hear more words at age one have bigger vocabularies at age two and beyond. The quality of the language children hear matters, too. Children love listening to *parentese*, the singsong tone of voice adults use with children. Children who hear more parentese tend to have bigger vocabularies.

Brainy Babies: Experience Changes Brain Responses

Infants learn language by listening to the language that surrounds them everyday. But what happens for dual language learners who hear two or more languages? By 11 months of age, children’s brains are changing in response to what languages they hear.

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Research shows that monolingual English-speaking babies' brains become specialized to process only English sounds. The brains of Spanish-English bilinguals become specialized to process both languages. This shows that the brains of bilingual infants adapt to “specialize” in whatever languages they hear.

During the first years of life, a child's brain is ready to learn from their everyday experiences. At this stage, the brain is like a rough draft, ready for life to shape it into a specialized adult brain. Children's early experiences with language form the foundation for later language learning. This is true whether children hear one or more languages.

Try This:

- **Talk with children to build their language skills.** Narrate what you're doing as you go about your day. Introduce new vocabulary words based on what you and the child experience together.
- **Make reading time part of your daily routine with children.** Reading aloud means children hear more language. This gives children more opportunities to become familiar with the sounds of language. If you are bilingual, read to children in each of their languages.

Learn More:

Dialogic Reading Supports Dual Language Learners

<https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/culture-language/article/dialogic-reading-supports-children-who-are-dual-language-learners-their>

How To Use Bilingual Books

English:

<https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/pdf/how-to-use-bilingual-books.pdf>

Spanish:

<https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/pdf/how-to-use-bilingual-books-esp.pdf>