

Why parents want their young children to learn two languages

Since the United States has become a country of many languages and cultures, our education system teaches a wide diversity of students including those not fully proficient in English. The Latino population in the United States is predicted to reach 24 percent of the general population by 2050 (Lindholm-Leary 2005). As a result, child care programs and preschools will be caring for and educating an increasing number of children with a wide variety of languages and experiences.

Some teachers and parents view this growing diversity with alarm, while others embrace it. In fact, some parents have begun to actively seek out bilingual education for their children at an early age.

What is bilingual education?

The term *bilingualism* has a variety of definitions and interpretations. One example describes bilingualism as extensive language contact between people who speak several different languages (Li 2006). In education,

bilingualism commonly means teaching in two languages, such as Spanish as the native language and English as the secondary.

The amount of each language used depends upon the program. Some programs help native English speakers learn Spanish (or another language), while other programs help Spanish speakers improve their fluency in English.

In an *immersion* program, a teacher uses the second language to teach virtually everything. It is the object of the instruction as well as the medium of instruction.

Early exposure to a second language gives children an opportunity to learn two languages as well as various aspects of a culture that is different from their own. The process of learning a second language provides the most benefits when it begins during the preschool years (Hammer, Lawrence and Miccio 2007).

What are the benefits of learning a second language?

Research clearly states there are cognitive, social, and educational benefits of young children learning a second language, especially before the age of 5 years (Thomas and Collier 2003). In addition, a bilingual educational setting can help children to develop a better understanding of different cultures, identities, and languages in a supportive learning environment (Fernandez 2006).

Studies on bilingual programs beginning at the preschool level have been found to produce better results when children are able to maintain and build upon the language skills of their first language while learning a second (Fernandez 2006). Therefore, child care and preschool programs using a bilingual approach to teach young children would do well to have strong parent partnerships in place with consistent communication with families.



Parental and family views on bilingualism have a significant impact on children's interpretation of language acquisition and bilingualism at home (Molyneux 2006). The use of more than one language at home also has an influence on children's attitude toward using two languages in different contexts, including child care and preschool programs (Tannenbaum and Howie 2002).

Parent views about bilingualism

To learn more about parents' views on bilingual education, we conducted interviews with five parents whose children attend a bilingual child care center and preschool in southwest Ohio. The center serves children 18 months to 5 years old, and children learn the Spanish language through daily interactions with their teachers and peers. All teachers at the center are fluent in Spanish and are native speakers from Ecuador, Mexico, and Honduras.

The parents below (not their real names) gave us their views on bilingual education and some of the reasons they chose this type of child care program for their children.

Parent one: Amy

Amy's 4-year-old daughter and 6-year-old son have been attending the child care center and preschool since it opened a year and a half ago. Amy's daughter attends full time, and her son attends during the summer break and on school holidays. Amy chose to send her children to a bilingual program because she

wanted them to learn Spanish so that the family could speak both languages at home.

Amy said she believes we live in a society that encourages English only, but she thinks it is a benefit to know English and Spanish. Both Amy and her husband speak Spanish. She attended a German immersion school when she was growing up in El Salvador and made the following comment about her personal experiences:

"Full immersion schools are a common education model in El Salvador. Many children attend these types of schools, but they can be expensive for families to afford."

Amy's daughter learned Spanish quickly and would "soak in" all the new knowledge every day. Amy liked the fact that this center also teaches culture and different ethnic practices so children are exposed to diversity while learning the language. She wants her children to be proud of their heritage since they would not necessarily gain a cultural understanding of the language in a traditional preschool setting.

She also believed that the bilingual exposure has helped to better prepare her daughter for kindergarten. Her son thrived when he entered kindergarten and quickly learned to read Spanish and English.

Another benefit was that both children could communicate with their Spanish-speaking grandparents and extended family when traveling abroad to visit. At home, both her son and daughter speak English and Spanish, but they prefer to communicate in English.

Parent two: Martha

Martha has five children—three girls and two boys—who attend the bilingual child care center and preschool. Their ages are 8, 7, 5, 4 and 2 ½ years old. Her 4- and 5-year-old children attend the center full time four days a week, and the two older children attend in the summer and on school holidays. Martha said one of the many benefits of the bilingual program was that it offered child care in addition to preschool, so her youngest child can attend.

Martha describes her husband as a Mexican-American who speaks fluent Spanish. She speaks no Spanish, but she wants her children to learn the language so they can also communicate in Spanish and



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better understand the culture of her husband and his extended family. Her husband's family still resides in Mexico, so learning Spanish is helpful because many of them do not speak English. In particular, her husband's mother does not speak any English, which creates a barrier when communicating with her grandchildren.

Martha's husband sometimes speaks to the children in Spanish at home, so she believes this may have helped with their transition. But her 4- and 5-year-old children have struggled. As she explained:

"My 4- and 5-year-old did have trouble transitioning, but not because of the language barrier. It was because this was a new school and an unfamiliar environment for them."

Martha believes there are many benefits of a bilingual program. Research on brain development clearly shows a positive link between learning different languages and cognitive development. She believes that young children tend to be more flexible when learning a second language. Many studies she has read show that bilingual children are more creative and open-minded than their peers.

Parent three: Emma

Emma and her family recently moved to southwest Ohio from the West Coast. She and her husband found this center by doing an online search for bilingual early childhood programs. She wanted a program for her son that emphasized other languages and cultures, in particular Spanish. Her 3-year-old son attends the center full time five days a week.

She chose this program to expose her son to other cultures and languages because she feels our U.S. education system is failing to provide diversity in public schools. She said this might be his only opportunity to learn through experiencing a bilingual educational setting. Emma feels a bilingual program may give him an extra advantage in his future career choice in our diverse country's economic system.

Emma's son was a late talker and slow to begin speaking in English at home. He did not start speaking until he was almost 2 ½ years old. Several weeks after starting at the center, he started talking more in both English and Spanish. Because she does not

understand Spanish well, she often does not know what he is saying or what he wants. For her son, learning a new language has given him confidence in speaking both languages.

Emma has also seen cognitive and social benefits of sending her child to the bilingual center. He appears more interested in problem-solving activities and enjoys reading books (in both English and Spanish). His favorite book is *If You Give a Mouse a Cookie*, which he has copies of in English and Spanish. He has also gained more confidence socially with his peers and even sometimes interacts with the family's Spanish-speaking neighbors. At home, approximately 40 percent of his communication is in Spanish. Sometimes he will mix up his sentences and speak a mixture of English and Spanish.

"For example, he may ask me *porque* instead of *why*. 'Porque is the water blue?'"

Parent four: Nathan

Nathan is the father of two, both of whom attend the center. His daughter attends full time, and his son attends in the summer and on school holidays. Nathan was born in northern Ohio, but his parents are from Puerto Rico. His wife lived in El Salvador for several years while completing her graduate degree with their two children when they were toddlers. Their children understand both English and Spanish, but rarely speak Spanish at home. Nathan had hoped they would pick up more of the language and culture when they were living in El Salvador with their mom, but they were both quite young.

Nathan views the bilingual program as an economic investment in their children's future since the cost is higher than a traditional preschool or child care center. As he said,

"We are spending approximately \$2,000 a month to send our kids to the center, so there is an economic investment in having them attend a full immersion preschool."

He also believes his children will have more opportunities as they get older, including career choices and ministry opportunities in other Spanish speaking-countries.

At home, the family speaks in both English and Spanish, but the majority of communication is done in English just because it is easier and quicker for the

children. Nathan joked that one advantage of his children being bilingual is that he can say things to them (about discipline) in Spanish when in public and no one else understands. The long-term benefit, he believes, depends on the personality and nature of the individual child.

He strongly believes that language is a critical component of all learning and places great value on learning a second language.

Parent five: Jenny

Jenny is the mother of two daughters who are 5 and 9 years old. The younger daughter attends the center full time, five days a week. Jenny wants her daughter to experience the culture at a bilingual child care center and preschool. This 5-year-old had the opportunity to attend all-day kindergarten in the public schools this year, but Jenny felt the bilingual center provided more stability for her daughter. She thought that she would be doing her daughter a disservice by not sending her to the center because there are few bilingual programs in the area.

“Our public school district has a lottery system to pick those children who (may) attend the full-day kindergarten program. My daughter won the lottery for a full-day placement slot, but I decided to keep her at the center for half of her day and at the public school for the other half. This gives her an opportunity to be exposed to the language for at least half of her day.”

At home, her 5-year-old will read and identify Spanish vocabulary words but must be prompted to do this, and her Spanish skills are not yet spontaneous.

Jenny’s husband was a Spanish major in college, so he is able to communicate well with the girls. Jenny strongly believes that the brain forms connections at an early age, and the opportunity to learn another language is especially important before the age of 5. Jenny attended an after-school Spanish class when she was in high school, but felt it was much more difficult to acquire the language in her late teens. She believes this is strong evidence that children are more capable of learning other languages at an early age.

Implications for caregivers and teachers

These parent interviews offer insight into parent perceptions regarding bilingual education during the early years. They contain several consistent themes. All five parents mentioned the advantages of their children being able to communicate in two languages. Parents believed by learning a second language, their children would have more opportunities in their future careers and education. This is important for teachers to know when planning the curriculum and classroom activities. While some child care and preschool programs may not use a completely bilingual teaching approach, they can still create a bilingual classroom by labeling objects and teaching concepts in two different languages.

Many of the parents mentioned the importance of strong parent-teacher partnerships and consistent communication practices. Much research has concluded that positive parent-teacher relationships, including frequent communication, have a significant impact on children’s positive academic achievement (Lawson 2003, Ryan et al. 1995). Most parents want to be a part of a collaborative relationship with their child’s teacher and an effective member of their child’s education team (Swick 2004).

Various aspects of the bilingual learning process, however, can be a challenge at home. Consequently, teachers can make sure to encourage parents to get involved in various aspects of the program. For example, teachers can invite parents into the classroom to share information with the children about their families’ own heritage and customs.



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Tips for teachers

One of the many challenges of bilingual classrooms is creating authentic and interactional learning environments for children (Lee, Hill-Bonnet and Gillespie 2008). Ideally the classroom learning space embodies contexts that encourage natural, and meaningful interactions between children and teachers.

Consider these factors when implementing a bilingual teaching approach:

Classroom and program environment: A cohesive and collaborative bilingual program has a vision with clear goals for all children to achieve and grow.

Curriculum and teaching: The bilingual curriculum reflects the cultures of all children and provides opportunities for children to interact and engage naturally.

Teacher quality: Teachers are familiar with bilingual models and are able to provide developmentally appropriate activities and opportunities for cooperative learning.

Family involvement: Parents from all linguistic and cultural backgrounds are welcomed and valued. Communication with families is consistent and frequent.

Teaching in a bilingual child care or preschool program can be challenging. Although the home environment is often the primary source of language acquisition and cultural identity, the preschool or child care setting also plays an important role (Garth McCullough and Adelman Reyes 2010). In many cases, a child's preschool or child care experience may set the tone for future learning. Therefore, child care and preschool teachers have the important task of providing developmentally appropriate activities that expose children to diverse cultures and experiences.

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