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Speaking Multiple Languages

By [Susan E. Canizares, Ph.D.](#)

Q: My only child is 3 years and 4 months old. We speak four languages at home. My daughter knows her alphabets in two languages, can name and recognize more than ten colors, count up to 100, draw smiley faces, sing and capture tunes extraordinarily fast, and work on simple puzzles. But she does not express herself in more than two or three familiar words. She repeats questions addressed to her if they are more than four words long, or if she hears unfamiliar sentences that contain familiar words. Also, she seems not to understand verbs and other abstract concepts. Is she autistic?

What are the advantages of knowing two languages?

A: There is considerable debate in the United States today over the issue of bilingualism and how it affects children's general cognitive abilities and also chances for success in school. What is clear, however, is the ability of young children to learn more than one language, beginning right at birth, when they are exposed to multiple language in consistent and meaningful ways.

In my own home, for example, our twins are learning Spanish and English simultaneously. They hear and speak only Spanish with their father, while I communicate with them in English. There are other successful patterns, of course. For example, children often acquire a language other than English as a first language in the home and learn English through social interactions outside the home. This can occur simultaneously or with English as a second language.



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The advantages to learning two or more languages include certain cognitive gains in which children seem to have a greater communicative depth that may boost thinking skills. There is also a cultural advantage, as language and culture cannot be separated. Therefore, children are better equipped to be sensitive to differences in others, respond to different ways of social interactions, and carry traditional knowledge that is uniquely part of a particular culture.

In children as young as 3, it is not unusual for their speaking vocabulary to be smaller in each language than the speaking vocabulary of English-only children. This difference minimizes by age 6 and some research shows that by this time, children who speak more than one language actually have larger vocabularies in both languages than their English-only counterparts.

It is thought that children are using these incredibly important first years to process both languages and their receptive-language skills will pace ahead of the expressive. When you hear your child repeating words or phrases after you, it is part of that cognitive processing she is engaged in. It would not, under normal circumstances, indicate any kind of autism. Autism is unrelated to the learning of multiple languages.

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